‘Brands are a network of the unacquainted,’ claims Grant McCracken, MIT anthropologist and author of the book Chief Cultural Officer. One of the great changes wrought on marketing by digital technology is the ability to create connections not just between brand and consumer, but between the consumers themselves: McCracken’s friends who haven’t met each other yet, huddled under a friendly branded umbrella. Both online and off, on social networks and elsewhere, marketers all over the world are attempting to engage with existing communities, or encourage the development of new ones.

The concept of ‘community’ in branding is not a new one. Much of Harley-Davidson and Apple’s success can be attributed to the enthusiasm of their respective communities, and members’ willingness to recruit newbies to further swell the ranks. However, the internet now affords us the opportunity to pledge allegiance to the brands we love, and bitch about the brands we hate, in equal measure. This vocalisation makes it easier for any brand to locate, identify and bring the ‘lovers’ together. People cluster around the most unlikely of products. Handwashes. Yeast spreads. Face creams. Hannah Montana. Much of this enthusiasm is organic, as consumers use the simple interfaces of social networks like Facebook to create pages to promote their own passions. Famously, Coca-Cola worked with the creators of a popular fan page on Facebook to transform it into an official destination.

The undisputed reigning champion of online community, Facebook’s epic expansion has seen several brand-friendly changes to the network in recent months, not least the addition of a ‘Like’ button which can be applied through the web for users to indicate their tastes and passions. Levi’s was one of the first brands to embrace this innovation, adding the button to their ecommerce page so that customers can ‘like’ various items of clothing. The company’s most recent announcement pertained to the development of a location-based service with gaming elements to rival platforms like Foursquare, in which users ‘check-in’ to various locations using their mobile phones. McDonald’s is a
brand communities / introduction / founding advertiser partner, promoting burgers and offers whenever somebody checks in from the golden arches. In February 2010, CEO Mark Zuckerberg announced that the service had passed the 400m user mark, supporting Nielsen’s 2009 finding that social networking had surpassed even email in popularity (67% of web users spend regular time on SNS and only 65% on email).

With those kinds of numbers, it is unsurprising that many brands have chosen to concentrate the majority of their community efforts on Facebook – Lurpak butter’s recent series of coordinated cook-offs, for example, helping to reinforce the brand’s commitment to getting Britain cooking again (‘because triumph never came out of a microwave’). However, joining a fan page is a one-click process – the lowest possible barrier to entry. Being a ‘fan’ of something, and being active in your enthusiasm for it both online and elsewhere are two different matters. As some brand managers struggle to calculate the worth of a Facebook fan, others have focused on more niche networks with smaller member numbers on the basis that a few avid fans are a more lucrative prospect than an indifferent horde.

Clothing brand American Apparel has maintained its status as the go-to for hipsters everywhere by targeting fashion, design and music communities. Recently, the brand partnered with invitation-only fashion community Lookbook to produce a piece of in-store promotion, a book containing 132 pictures submitted by the Lookbook community of themselves wearing at least one item from the American Apparel collection. A representative of the brand said of the exercise, ‘What we liked about it is that it’s 77 people who each have their own sense of style showing how they like to wear American Apparel. Our photographers and designers see the garments in one way and sometimes the customers and fans see it a totally different way...That’s a big reason why we’re giving it away at the stores and we hope people take it and get inspired or interested in pieces they wouldn’t have considered before.’ By partnering with Lookbook, American Apparel were gifted with a fresh take on their own brand.

Up at the high stakes table are the brands eschewing pre-existing social networks and striking out on their own, launching independent communities outside of the social networking behemoths in order to entice loyalists to connect with themselves and each other. BMW in China have an active community gathered for brand and product information on their own forums, and brands from Doritos Argentina to Pepsi in the US have created their own digital hubs through which to attract a crowd to a variety of causes.

So – an active, healthy presence on a variety of social networks, or your very own specialised hub? Organised offline activity, or a global network of fans brought together through the power of a ‘Like’ button? The path to community engagement is strewn with tough decisions, and as many epic failures as there are success stories. However, it is a marketer with a heart of stone that could resist the delicious hubbub created by a thousand passionate brand advocates all talking at once. Through innovative courting and careful cultivation, the community looks set to become the cornerstone of any modern brand.
When heavyweight players with budgets to match start declaring brand communities ‘the place to be’, it’s time to pay more attention to how they work.

Brand communities are approaching their tipping point. P&G, which has invested in specific communities around particular brands in its portfolio, has now signed a partnership with Facebook and wants to ensure that its brands have a meaningful presence on the world’s favourite social network this year.

‘[P&G’s thought-leaders] certainly view Facebook as a must-have for digital advertising and brand building. They didn’t quantify what they are paying for that exposure, but it is quite clear that the numbers are very big,’ wrote venture capitalist David Hornik on VentureBlog earlier this year.

And Coca-Cola is increasing its online community and social media activity, eschewing campaign microsites in favour of YouTube and Facebook. Coca-Cola wants these platforms to be the lead online channels for international campaigns for Coke Zero and Fanta.

Not to be outdone, Pepsi shunned the Super Bowl in the US to launch its Refresh Everything Project, providing money to worthy community causes (see case study, page 22).

Back in October 2008, Gartner made a prescient prediction, speculating that 60% of Fortune 1000 brands will connect to or have some form of community initiative on their websites in 2010. And just last year, Deloitte’s 2009 Tribalization of Business Study – which canvassed 400 US companies – found that 94% of enterprises were continuing to invest in online communities and social media. Despite the recession and budget cuts, 39% indicated that they were deploying extra staff on these projects.

In the words of Ed Moran, director of product innovation at Deloitte Services: ‘Organisations’ continued and enhanced investment in online communities underscores the perceived potential that they may provide
to the enterprise. Social media and communities are expected to play a significant role in the way in which companies are interacting with employees, customers, partners and the larger business ecosystem, thereby redefining the very edge of the corporation.

**Passion turns mainstream**

Brand communities have in fact been around longer than you might think.

*Jeep*, *Apple* and *Harley-Davidson* have always brought together like-minded brand enthusiasts. Traditionally, these groups hinged on meeting in person as opposed to digital connections, but what members shared was the same: a genuine identification with the brand.

But early examples of online communities came from computer forums which were brand-driven due to the particular challenges of working with specific pieces of kit. *Sam Decker*, now chief marketing officer at Austin, Texas-based social commerce experts *BazaarVoice*, wrote a book about marketing to computer user groups, a long-standing feature of the tech scene, in 1995.

What’s changed in the last 15 years is the relative ease with which brand communities can be established: it takes just five minutes for a brand manager to set up a Facebook page. On a superficial level, this means that brand communities can be mass market and incredibly easy to access, whereas once they required a certain level of technical ability not just to initiate but also to participate. The skill comes in maintaining and engaging that community once it’s been set up.

**Ghost-towns**

Clumsy invitations to join branded social networks, Facebook fan pages and Twitter streams are now just part of our everyday marketing flotsam and jetsam, and many are in fact inert, let alone interactive: Gartner estimates that 50% of brand communities fail ‘to establish mutual purpose, ultimately eroding customer and company values’.

This could be because many brands are still experimenting. A report by Chicago-based community marketing and influencer specialist *ComBlu*, covering 45 brands and 135 communities, found that 47% of brands had launched one-off efforts but had no coherent strategy, 24% were suffering from ghost-town communities with no recent member growth or activity and 9% had community overload, with too many destinations clearly competing for the same audience.

*ComBlu* found that just 20% of brands could demonstrate ‘a solid community foundation with integrated brand presence across social assets’.

Successful examples included *Sony*, *Sears* and *AT&T*, which demonstrated both a cohesive strategy and adoption of industry best practice.

**Getting it right**

Brand communities exist in a number of forms and can serve a series of purposes, from brand engagement to research and customer service.

**Successful examples of each include:**

- *Burberry’s Art of the Trench* site, which allows users to submit pictures of themselves wearing the brand’s iconic trenchcoats, as well as search through submitted images using a range of filters;
- *Kraft’s* use of a closed research community to help co-create every detail of its *South Beach Diet* range;
- *ComBlu’s* project for *Microsoft Office Live Small Business*, which helped reduce support costs by 60%, thanks to community members answering questions that had previously been handled by Microsoft employees.
Because brand communities can serve so many different purposes, the aims and responsibilities — particularly those regarding budgets — need to be carefully defined. Getting it right means working together, internally, across the agency ecosystem and with relevant technology partners.

John Bell, global managing director, 360˚ Digital Influence at Ogilvy, says: ‘It crosses the usual disciplines, [it’s difficult] funding and supporting a community when the benefit is servicing three or four groups internally.’ Successful brand communities have a well thought-out strategy and purpose in common, as well as an ability to provide added value to consumers who choose to become brand fans.

People use different terms to describe that added value. ‘Utility including emotional utility’ is one. Decker sums it up well on his blog: ‘Communities succeed if they solve a need, share an interest/passion and/or connect me with people I care about.’

By setting up or stepping into communities, brands have an opportunity to act like ‘networks of the unacquainted’. As anthropologist, author and MIT research associate Grant McCracken pointed out in an interview with Contagious (see issue 16): ‘Social networks are already operating to help people find one another. It seems to me that brands should help out here... All of us would be grateful, I think, for social contacts that surrender accident for some process of selection and the brand that makes itself the intelligent intermediary would create immense value for consumers and itself. The next time a brand supplies me with the company of a sensationally interesting conversational partner, that’s the moment it wins my enduring loyalty.’

Following the audience
The total reach of the social web is vast. According to Nielsen, global consumers spent more than five and half hours on social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter in December 2009, a year-on-year increase of 82%. With Facebook now having over 400m members, successful brand communities that use that network have the potential to be another mass medium for advertisers to use in the media mix.

The transition to social media is even more extreme in certain markets and demographics. ‘TV advertising was important when people were spending a lot of time watching TV,’ says Tim Malbon, founder and creative director at London-based community services and utility creators Made by Many. ‘People are spending four hours a day on Facebook — and these are people with a job. If you want to be relevant to people’s lives you have to be in there.’

Melissa Loddo, digital marketing manager at UK fashion retailer New Look, adds: ‘We’ve understood that 96% of our core audience of 16 to 24-year-old girls are on social media sites every month.’

Brand communities are also increasingly dominating mobile media. The latest statistics (December 2009) from mobile communications industry trade body GSMA in the UK found that the most popular site by unique visitors was Facebook, ahead of Google, mobile network platforms, Yahoo!, the BBC, Microsoft and Nokia.

Even aside from big global sites such as Facebook, branded communities can be effective, existing on a range of other platforms including Ning, Orkut, Twitter or Kaizen100, depending on the market and strategic need.

The art of engagement
In an age of content overload, however, brand communities need to be encouraged to make the conversation around a particular brand part of their social media consumption.

And the power of those who do sign up is that they then take these affiliations with them wherever they go on the social web: the average Facebook user has 130 friends, all of whom will know about their affiliation to particular brands and any brand-related activities they participate in.

Vitamin Water’s ‘Flavor Creator’ Facebook app, for example, not only allowed users to build their idea for the winning flavour, but also encouraged people to tell their friends about it, aggregating buzz from Google News, Twitter, Flickr, and Foodgawker to allow users to see the top 10 flavours in contention (see case study, page 25).

The tricky part is persuading them to become your friend in the first place. If you build it they will not necessarily come, or - even worse - they will come but will never return because they find nothing enticing them to stay.
WHAT IS A BRAND COMMUNITY?

The classic definition of brand communities emanates from two marketing professors. Albert Muniz Jr, now assistant professor of Marketing at DePaul University in Chicago, and Thomas O’Guinn, currently professor of marketing at Wisconsin School of Business, described them in the *Journal of Consumer Research* in 2001 as ‘a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand’.

For *Contagious*, there are essentially four key criteria that define brand communities as separate from other social media activity:

1 / Members of brand communities unite around a brand or product. They don’t just talk about the product and its uses (as is clearly the case with Harley-Davidson); often the focus is tangential but related to product position. A good example is American Express’s Open Forum, a community for business owners designed to provide advice and support to help them grow their companies.

2 / Such venues can be brand-owned or initiated or fan-owned/initiated. Ford in the US owns just half the Facebook nameplate pages for its brands. Brand participation is not a given in fan-owned spaces but some level of support such as news provision, prizes or access to events is increasingly common.

3 / Community members don’t have to come to the community; it can come to them. Standard social network platforms disperse content and commentary to fans and their friends, without them ever revisiting the brand page. This model may be more effective for low interest brands or for products where being a brand fan is used as a social label, as in the case of Coke’s Facebook page.

4 / Community members should be able to reach out to each other and not just communicate up to the brand – although the latter is more common on Facebook and similar social network sites. Asian brand communities are particularly good at providing a range of tools including forums, picture sharing and IM for users to connect with each other.

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859MM Unique Users, +32% Y/Y

Source: comScore, December 2009, and Morgan Stanley (Internet Trends, April 2010)
Brand communities exist at a number of levels, bespoke and owned, on social networks, via dispersed content on social networks, short-term campaign sites, or as a presence within existing communities.

This chapter provides details of the different types of brand community and a breakdown of the different consumer types needed to successfully populate them. Understanding the differences within each of these areas can help brands navigate the challenge of creating successful brand communities.

It's worth remembering, however, that adopting the correct structure is only one part of the recipe for success. Attitude is also important. ‘You need to be invited, to be humble and understand that you are there to enable the community rather than to tell people something. That's the difference between community and campaigns,’ says Mel Exon, London-based managing partner at BBH Labs.

And while we can try to categorise the different types of ‘brand community’, it's also important to think about communities more generally as wider conversations going on about a brand, irrespective of location.

‘Your brand community isn’t the Facebook page or even the microsite you create, it’s the network of conversations going on between people who like your brand,’ argues John Woodward, planning director at Publicis Worldwide. ‘That can be on a limitless number of social sites, informally, on their own Facebook pages etc. So, what really matters is to participate in this ongoing conversation, adding stimulation and interest. It may not be necessary to own the location.’

### Owned communities

An owned community is likely to be a long-term endeavour, an investment in an on-going relationship with a group of committed supporters.

Campaign activity may pass over the site and boost traffic temporarily but the community will continue to ebb and flow even without these injections of content or added interest.

Coke’s Facebook page, for example, includes images from its Happiness campaign as well as the chance to download the Coca-Cola Happy Status App – messages tied to its more traditional brand communications – in addition to fan created content.

Coke's Facebook page, for example, includes images from its Happiness campaign as well as the chance to download the Coca-Cola Happy Status App – messages tied to its more traditional brand communications – in addition to fan created content.

If successful, such communities will have true dialogue between members as well as with the brand and over time users will start to feel a sense of ownership. This is clearly the case in Ning-based community **Navy for Moms**, designed to help the parents of new recruits to the US Navy cope with the trials of training and long tours, where there’s a vibrant conversation, questions and clear emotional support, alongside the official content (see case study, p32).

Owned communities can use more flexible technology and allow brands to create more engaging experiences as they are not restricted by the structure of the host site. Chocolate brand **Wispa** in the UK, for example, has chosen to create its new site separate from a very successful (800,000+ fans) Facebook page. Wispa.co.uk lets visitors upload photos and add their birthday to the site calendar as well as make personalised virtual bars, record their own chocolate-themed anthem on a soundboard and play a ‘Room
Branding communities can be open to all or invitation only in the case of the research communities run by the likes of consumer advisory panel and brand communities specialist Verve or Watertown, MA HQ-ed Communispace, which works for GSK, Meredith, Unilever and Kellogg’s.

Brands may also want to restrict membership for other reasons, as in the case of BMW’s MyChinaBMW community, for example, which is only open to BMW owners. The appeal of joining such a group is not just the additional content that BMW might provide but also the chance to be part of an exclusive group and make connections with like-minded individuals.

**Dispersed communities**

A dispersed community such as a Facebook page is a much more casual relationship, lower cost but generally more about interaction with the brand rather than other members. Comments will mostly be viewed via profile walls rather than direct visits. Engagement can be short and sweet rather than prolonged and deep.

‘The people coming in are slightly less committed and doing it for a bit of fun,’ says Verve’s Mike Hall. ‘You are taking them from a community they are using for personal, social and casual reasons and into something that’s focused and clearly commercial.’

This casual element may be one of the factors behind Facebook’s recent transformation of ‘Fans’ to ‘Likes’. Now, consumers don’t need to ‘become a fan’ of a brand page – they can simply ‘like’ it instead – a much lighter commitment and one that might encourage more people to engage with brand pages.

These dispersed communities can be much more relevant environments for low interest categories, such as FMCG. ‘Is the brand strong enough and the product compelling enough to have their own brand community? If not look at a more distributed strategy using Twitter, Facebook and MySpace,’ says Garrick Schmitt, group vice-president, experience planning at global interactive agency Razorfish.

Such platforms work as both short- or long-term presences – a great example of short-term presences includes IKEA’s Facebook showroom, which ran for just two weeks to highlight the opening of the new Malmo Store in Sweden and made brilliant use of fans’ own walls to disseminate its message (see case study, p. 24).

Dispersed communities can present data issues, however. As the platform is outside the brand’s control, it’s essential to back up members’ details and have other ways to contact them should the site go down or lose members’ data. There may also be limitations on their CRM potential, in that the host site functionality and privacy rules restrict the data brands can use.
Hosted communities

Communities can also be established in places where there is already a concentration of the target group – in the advertising cliché, ‘fishing where the fish are’.

The rationale for this type of community can be similar to the decision to launch a dispersed community but the key difference is that the community remains predominantly within the selected environment.

Disney’s *Hannah Montana The Movie* release on Blu-ray and DVD, for example, was promoted via a community presence within teen network Stardoll, with a hub page – or Club - where members could view trailers, enter competitions and get exclusive Hannah Montana gifts. The Club attracted more than 100,000 members and is still active.

Virtual communities

Finally, the virtual community is a brand space that lacks a central focus but might have an extensive social media estate of content via YouTube, Flickr and the like. While users don’t sign up they do ‘gather’ at such places to discuss the brand and its activity.

These are more likely to be campaign-based and often PR-led such as Sony’s *Twilight Football* activity. Run by London-based Immediate Future, it was designed to promote the electrical giant’s low light camera capabilities in multiple markets around a series of football matches at stunning locations around the world.

A series of media partners launched competitions to select the teams that would play at these locations, challenging them to justify their selection by contributing content. Twitter feeds, Flickr pages as well as partnerships with 90 pan-European media owners helped spread the word, reaching an estimated 12 million consumers.

Managing content

The type of content that’s relevant for each of these different platform types also needs careful consideration. UK fashion retailer *New Look* is a good example of a brand that employs a multi-pronged approach, creating different content for each space.

The brand has a Twitter feed with 3,000 followers, a YouTube channel and a Facebook page with 146,000 fans. In addition, it runs a closed research community with 3,000 members and a new loyalty site, currently being tested in Manchester with 30,000 members, where shoppers can go and see how many reward points they have accumulated.

Digital marketing manager Melissa Loddo explains: ‘Our approach with social media is to tailor content as appropriate to each channel. Facebook is more throwaway - it’s product updates, gossip, things that we think are cool and by extension we think the customers will be interested in. Twitter is more expert, more fashion-y and more targeted. We are dealing with people in the industry, the media, bloggers, people who are almost professional within fashion. The content is a bit more industry interest. Our customers may not be as interested in catwalk designer influences but that might be something Twitter users might be.’
Meanwhile, the owned research community MyLook and loyalty site Fashion Rewards will get longer stories such as buyer interviews, in view of their greater commitment and engagement with the brand.

**Community members**

It's also possible to classify the people that use brand community sites in a range of ways. The gold standard is the Forrester ladder, which is based on US online adults and covering the whole of social media rather than simply brand communities.

Originally launched in 2007, it shows the degree to which US online adults engage with the different forms of social media from publishing a blog or article, updating status on a social network to rating and reviewing products and services and classifies them as creators, critics, collectors, joiners, spectators or inactives. Earlier this year, Forrester added 'conversationalists' to encompass the rise of Twitter, creating a seven-rung ladder.

If that seems too complex, Katy Howell, founder of London-based online PR and public relations agency Immediate Future, describes a 1:9:90 ratio as a simple rule of thumb between creators, critics and followers. In essence, the creators give you the content, the critics give you the dialogue and the followers expand your reach. When you start a community the first two groups are most important and the ratio should be skewed that way, but longer term you want to pull in the followers as well.

There are some caveats to this. A report on The State of Community Management 2010 by community manager peer network The Community Roundtable highlighted that while the 1:9:90 rule of thumb is a good benchmark for large consumer brand communities and product support communities, it is not necessarily applicable in communities that deal with market research, or product innovation.

Regular competitions and prizes provide easy ways to get creators involved and brands should not be frightened if the critics get controversial. A campaign for IKEA in Finland, created by London-based agency St Luke’s, challenged the nation’s obsession with design snobbery to create a vibrant debate. Although most comments from the 150,000 visitors were positive, those that were negative merely created controversy and helped fuel the conversation further.

**KEY TAKE OUTS**

Owned communities, such as Navy for Moms and MyBMWClub, are for the long-term; they give brands more control over design, functionality and data collection. Dispersed communities, such as IKEA's Facebook page, offer a community-lite option for less engaged ‘fans’ and are the most cost-effective option for campaign communities.

Hosted communities, such as Clubs within Stardoll, are more akin to a media buy, targeting consumers where they are and, mostly, keeping content within the host community.

Virtual communities, such as Sony Twilight’s Football activity, have no central space but a series of discrete sites where relevant content can be viewed and commented on.

The rule of thumb mix of participants in consumer brand communities is 1:9:90, creators, critics and followers. Active management is required to get the creators to produce things for the critics to dissect.

Whatever type of ‘community activity’ a brand embarks on, the conversations about the brand may be happening in a number of spaces and what’s really important is to participate in those conversations – i.e. brand communities should always be part of a larger social media strategy.

**links**

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Ultimately if brand communities are to be a success then consumers have to get something out of it. To paraphrase Lance Armstrong: ‘it’s not about the brand’ - there has to be clear consumer value. That value can come in many shapes and sizes and this chapter will run through the common themes that underpin successful brand communities.

Deloitte’s 2009 Tribalization survey found that the key challenges for marketers in making their community work were getting people to join, stay engaged and keep returning, all clear basic KPIs for a successful community, online or offline, fan-owned or brand owned.

While media support can be used to boost fan numbers or at least initial visitor numbers, ultimately it’s the core positioning of the community that will determine whether they stay engaged and keep returning.

An article at the Branding Strategy Insider blog run by US and German based brand agency The Blake Project argues that: ‘for a community to be actively adopted, customers must feel a need to connect with each other in the context of the brand’s consumption’.

Author Martin Roll, CEO of branding strategists VentureRepublic, gives four ways this active adoption might occur: via the sharing of information as in the technology communities; the validation of their choices for a lifestyle or fashion brand such as Nike or Louis Vuitton; to express one’s personality; or to identify with a specific segment.

Our classification identifies five different themes, detailing what motivates consumers to take part as well as providing clear guidance on how brands can manage consumer expectations and levels of involvement.

Some communities will serve a number of these different need states. Nike+, for example, not only provides emotional support for runners as they seek affirmation of their need to pound the streets but also connects runners and creates competitions between members to deliver microfame.
Microfame

Brand community experts are united about the power of microfame as a key driver for participation. Recognition can be delivered by rewards that deliver enhanced status within the community such as Amazon’s flagging up of those who review more books, videos and other products.

‘Advocates are motivated by microfame; that’s their reward - marketplace or peer recognition,’ says Steve Hershberger, principal and co-founder at Chicago-based community marketing and influencer specialist ComBlu. ‘You can buy loyalty with coupons for lower involvement groups but for advocates if you try and buy their loyalty they will be offended.’

Brands are now looking to celebrate the biggest fans by giving them semi-official roles. Deloitte notes that 20% of its survey respondents have set up formal ‘ambassador’ programmes that give outsiders preferential treatment in return for their active role. One of the oldest such programmes is Microsoft’s Most Valuable Professional – designed to reward those who help others solve their technical problems. Originally started on Usenet forums, MVPs get a logo for their blogs, profiles and business cards. Each year they have to requalify for these privileges.

Microfame can also be delivered in the most private of places; the profile page. This allows participants to portray themselves as they would like to be seen. ‘Profile pages allow you to put up an image of yourself and put in text. You can create this person. It may be an element of you but it can be whoever you want,’ says Tim Malbon, founder and creative director at London-based Made by Many.

Deals

But it’s not just about fame and recognition. Razorfish’s 2009 Feed research, which profiled the motivation of 1,000 ‘connected consumers’ in the US, found that on Twitter and Facebook, a lot of fans were simply waiting for deals. 44% of Twitter brand followers did so for special offers and the figure was 37% on Facebook and MySpace.

A more recent survey by MarketingSherpa – published in December 2009 – backs this up. It found that 64% of US consumers followed a brand primarily to learn about specials and sales. This doesn’t have to be a bad thing. A key part of airBaltic’s successful social media strategy has been the use of deals and offers to recruit fans. The Latvian airline used Facebook and Twitter to recruit followers offering 10% discounts to existing fans for every 1,000 new sign-ups. Discount offers exclusively for Facebook and Twitter followers have also been part of the strategy (see case study, page 28).

The key factor that brands have to take on board if they target this type of consumer is that deals should be priced correctly to ensure they do not cannibalise existing revenue streams.

Emotional utility

It’s no co-incidence that some of the biggest and most successful communities involve our emotional needs as well as our desire to celebrate our nearest and dearest.

New mums have flocked to nappy brand communities such as Pampers Village in the search for information and reassurance, for example. Baby photo competitions are another metric that’s been successfully used to get customers participating on such sites.

Similarly dog owners around the world have demonstrated their canine devotion by posting pictures on Doggysnaps, a ‘Flickr for dogs’ launched in 2006 by UK animal charity Dogs Trust. The level of engagement in this 50,000 strong community is such that people have met there and got married.
The diet/weight loss area is an interesting subset of the emotional support model. Based around the insight that a diet is more likely to be seen through with the support and advice of your friends, such sites have become some of the most successful communities.

Weight loss brand Atkins, which delivers emotional empathy and support to weight conscious consumers via an owned community, now has more than 2.5m members (see Joseph Jaffe article, p 38). Rival Nutrisystem has 4.6m participants and counting.

For its part, UK retail giant Tesco has launched a subscription-based diet site. Tescodiets.com charges just under £30 for eight weeks support and £78 for a year’s membership, providing personalised meal plans, a weekly shopping list, mentoring and online weigh-ins as well as access to other dieters.

The success of these communities has not gone unnoticed by FMCG brands. In 2010 Kellogg’s Special K brand launched Be Victorious, a 12-month campaign spearheaded by Leo Burnett, Chicago running in the US and Canada to support women who want to lose weight. The ‘Victory Project’ community element includes the chance to find a buddy with whom to share the highs and lows (see case study, page 32).

**Technical expertise**

One factor behind the success of diet sites is the fact that relevant brands can provide expertise. Expertise has been long been a driver for the tech sector and such communities are increasingly being used as a way of providing low cost customer support.

Anti-virus brand AVG uses a forum to help users of its free software while Xbox communities provide gameplay support to console users stuck between an ice-crystal wielding assassin and a hit squad of heavily armoured marines.

The success of such communities depends as much upon the input of customers – other community members – as the expertise of the brands themselves. As planning director of Publicis Worldwide Jonathan Woodward explains: ‘Brands can still be experts in their territories, but “because I say so” doesn’t really cut it anymore. Customers are more and more likely to question the impartiality of brand expertise. Therefore, you need to nourish your credibility by thought leadership and third party endorsement. And, the best third party endorsement is a satisfied customer. Ultimately, the “expertise” of a company today doesn’t only reside in its R&D department, it also resides in the people who have tried the brand, for different purposes, in different circumstances, and can credibly pass on that practical, real world knowledge and satisfaction to other customers.’

**Exclusivity**

A further incentive for consumers can be the chance to get early, often exclusive access to information or products. This is an area where brand-owned sites definitely have the edge over the fanzone.

‘The reason they come to this community,’ says John Kerr, regional digital director for Edelman Digital Asia Pacific of BMW’s MyBMWClub.cn, ‘is basically for early brand information that doesn’t exist in the bulletin boards [run by fans].’

Open only to China’s 150,000 and rising BMW owners, the site offers car fanatics the chance to talk to each other about their Beamers, post pictures and share their love of driving. ‘People are passionate about their cars. Put an audio clip of a new engine on the site and you get a huge response to that,’ says Kerr.

Other successful uses of exclusive positioning include Courvoisier’s The Future 500. This is a networking club that exists both online and via
events with entry by application only. Members get access to exclusive content and the chance to market themselves to fellow ‘rising stars’. It is the old boys’ club for the digital age (see case study, page 23).

**The art of listening**

If each successful community is driven by one or some combination of the themes above then there are also things that consumers want from all brand communities.

Perhaps the most important is the sense of being listened to. For obvious reasons this is most acute in research communities, where members may not all be brand advocates.

‘[Consumers] want to feel that their views are being appreciated. That’s where the participation of the client, especially at a senior level, is so important,’ says Mike Hall, development partner at customer panels and brand community specialist Verve.

Some research-based closed communities will hand over token sums such as $10 a month but cold hard cash is pretty rare.

And it’s not just about being listened to; they want to see evidence that their comments have made an impact. Co-creation communities – where brands work with a select group of consumers to develop new products – only work where the brand listens and responds.

‘Kraft did a community with weight conscious women and it quickly emerged they did not want to feel they were on a diet, they wanted portion control,’ says Julie Wittes Schlack, SVP of innovation and design at Communispace, a global community market research company headquartered in Watertown, MA, which also works with brands such as Unilever and Hallmark.

The ultimate motivator for these kinds of communities is seeing your influence on products and services in store. ‘There is tremendous organic advocacy if panel members see something on the store shelf that they had a voice in,’ she adds.

This need to see a reaction from consumer input doesn’t just apply to co-creation communities. All community members want to feel that their input has an impact.

‘Brands have to use the insights they are getting or the community will leave them,’ warns John Weich, creative director at Amsterdam-based Lemon Scented Tea.

Weich cites the case of KLM who asked all their frequent flyers what they could improve, leading to the introduction of a text check in service, which was clearly communicated at launch as being in response to their suggestions.

**Ceding control**

The other theme that applies to all communities is the need to hand over some control to the users. The ability to influence matters such as content and direction must be layered on top of the utility/value offered by the site.

This might mean presenting a more DIY interface than agencies have traditionally developed or not finessing the community before launch.

‘With [BA travel community] Metrotwin we set out to build the simplest possible site we could and grow it from there. We realised that something very small that then could grow with the input of the community and our own learnings would be more powerful,’ says London-based BBH Labs managing partner Mel Exon.
Steve Taylor, head of digital planning at London-based communications agency CMW, cites the thinking of Clay Shirky, author of Here Comes Everybody, and his concept of unfinished edges. A classic Shirky quote is: ‘Something cleaned up right to the edges has no room for me. Perfection says you don’t belong here’.

But brands don’t have to give up total control: a loosened grip doesn’t have to be a free for all.

**Participation**

Verve’s Mike Hall uses the catch phrase ‘participation is the new control’ to describe the new relationship between brands and consumers.

‘If companies – including, especially, senior experts – engage in conversation online on member topics as well as on their own initiatives, they will be rewarded with more, better decisions, made more quickly. Stimulating wide participation of the community members is also important. Companies must give freely to ensure members feel rewarded and the community thrives. Participation is the oxygen of the community,’ he wrote in the December 2009 edition of Research magazine.

Brands can actively moderate via clear policies as to what is and what isn’t acceptable on the site. Automated tools can help keep the language clean enough for the chairman to see. And they can also direct the community to celebrate what the brand thinks is important by welcoming the contributions that match the brand positioning, putting them on the home page or featuring them in discussions, for example.

‘One answer is by hero-ing the things that underline your brand message,’ says CMW’s Taylor. ‘Someone might create a piece of content and load that up to YouTube. You can say do you mind if we play it on our site? Invariably that person is delighted.’

Ultimately members will work within the framework they see in front of them. A raucous and anarchic community will attract raucous and anarchic members.

**KEY TAKE OUTS /**

Know what benefits your community is providing: are you solving a definite need? Don’t just think about the benefits for the brand /

Listen to what consumers say. A conversation where only one party listens is not a two-way dialogue /

Make it clear that you value their thoughts by changing what you do. And don’t forget to tell members what you did and why you did it /

Give members a role in influencing the direction of the community. They can’t participate if you take all the decisions /

You don’t have to give up total control; you can steer the conversation your way and provide clear guidelines on how users should behave /

Celebrate the stuff you like. Make heroes of key members to educate the others as to what the community is really about /

**links /**

www.theblakeproject.com  http://thevictoryproject.msn.com
www.brandingstrategyinsider.com  www.avgforums.com
www.venturerepublic.com  www.xbox.com/community
www.airbaltic.com  www.courvoisierthefuture500.com
www.pampers.com  www.lemonscentedtea.com
www.doggysnaps.com  www.klm.com
www.atkins.com  www.metrotwin.com
www.nutrisystem.com  www.cmwlondon.com
www.tescodiets.com  www.shirky.com/herecomeseverybody
www.specialk.com  www.research-live.com
The conventional wisdom on brand communities is that once you start you can't stop. Consumers simply won't accept that a conversation can be initiated but then dropped. The truth, however, is that brand communities can exist for both short and long-term goals. Communities can be gathered around specific campaign messages or around longer-term brand positioning.

While there are financial advantages to running long-term communities, it is possible to run a successful short-term presence. O2’s Facebook party campaign (through Agency Republic, London), which challenged UK universities to win a party by creating the most social noise, worked well. Participants knew that once the event was over the community would cease to have a reason to exist.

The bottom line is that brands should make their timescale clear right from the start, thank consumers for their participation if the community is to close and give them the opportunity to stay in touch.

The quickie

The beauty of the short-term community is that it provides marketers with the chance to experiment, to see what social media and brand communities can deliver for them.

That doesn’t mean campaign communities will gradually be replaced by longer-term ones. Short term communities are great for building buzz around a launch, especially in low interest categories such as FMCG.

Marmite’s UK launch of extra strong brand extension XO used the lure of exclusivity and live events to create a community, called the Marmarati, around the love it/loath it yeast spread, building up a network of advocates before the product hit the shelves (see case study, page 24).

However, a campaign can also be the ideal way of funding a community launch. The promotional budget for the additional media often needed to recruit members already exists so it makes sense to use that as the driver for something longer lasting.
Comparethemarket.com’s TV spokesman Aleksandr the Meerkat in the UK now has a vibrant community of over 700,000 Facebook fans and 37,000 Twitter followers after being launched using traditional media.

In a campaign spearheaded by VCCP, London, Aleksandr made his TV debut in January 2009 and continues to star in the UK price comparison site’s advertising, with the community now a vibrant part of the message.

If a campaign is centred around a positioning that holds true for the longer term then a campaign community can evolve into a valuable on-going property.

That’s certainly the hope of Lee Clow, global director of media arts at TBWA\Chiat\Day, for Pepsi’s Refresh Everything campaign. Clow has ambitions for the site to go global, if it can show results. Having traditionally used music to convey the fact that every generation makes the world its own, Pepsi is now using community, combined with money to communicate the same message.

‘I would love to have this become an on-going good news community using money that comes from sales of Pepsi,’ he says. ‘I’d love to believe it’ll become a compelling reason to buy a Pepsi rather than a Coke.’

Communities can also live on after the brand or campaign that gave them reason to exist has ended. UK radio station Magic FM asked listeners to upload images that made them feel good and used the contributed content to make TV ads. After nine ads the campaign has ended but consumers continue to upload images at goodmoodfilm.co.uk.

The downside of taking a short-term approach is cost. Since recruitment is a major investment, the true value of gathering fans and friends together is not always realised if the site is closed down prematurely.

Brand managers might want to consider extending the timescale for their campaign communities to maximise payback. ‘I think you have to expand the time horizon, from three months to a year,’ says Razorfish group vice-president, experience planning Garrick Schmitt.

Long-term relationships

It’s this long lead time to real ROI that is one of the factors behind Coca-Cola’s shift away from traditional campaign sites towards community platforms. Coke’s decision to use Facebook and YouTube pages as the lead online channels for international activity for Coke Zero and Fanta brands has been widely reported.

Prinz Pinakatt, the Coca-Cola Company’s interactive marketing manager for Europe, was reported in New Media Age in January 2010 as saying: ‘In some cases some of our campaigns won’t need a coke.com-hosted site. In most cases these will still exist as it’s the most obvious destination for a consumer, but it might only be a page linking to YouTube encouraging people to join the community there.’

The benefit for Coke is that it can maintain a connection with its followers as the conversation ebbs and flows around campaigns.

Other brands are making a similar judgment. ‘There is a much greater understanding across all the companies we work for of longevity,’ says Immediate Future founder Katy Howell, who
works with brands such as Sony Europe, Hotel Chocolat and Sara Lee. ‘It means that the campaigns change but the understanding of that basic positioning of the consumer stays the same.’

It’s not just a case of economics; community dynamics can take a while to settle down. Just as in the real world, consumers take time to feel comfortable with each other and interact more freely.

‘Users at [MyLook] are really established with each other and comfortable with expressing themselves,’ says New Look digital marketing manager Melissa Loddo of the brand’s research community, which has been running since July 2008. ‘Relationships evolve and they do take time to get established.’

Community businesses

Just as businesses are looking to brand communities to build sales and advocacy, so businesses can also evolve from communities backed by engaged and supportive advocates.

An article in The Harvard Business Review in April 2009 cites Outdoorseiten in Germany – set up by outdoors types to discuss the best gear to buy. Naturally, after a while they put all that they’d learnt from these discussions into creating their own products, finding a ready market among community members. Research has found that the presence of the community logo on a product made it nearly 20% more attractive to members than a similar product.

Similarly, US T-shirt design company Threadless, which effectively started out as a hobby, has turned its art-driven community into the basis for a very successful business. It now has one million members who vote on the designs submitted by 78,000 of their co-citizens to decide which get made. Other brands now sponsor design contests on Threadless. No money changes hands but the sponsors – who have included Mountain Dew – provide additional prizes such as arcade games.

There are key advantages to this community-driven business model: ‘We know that we are creating stuff that people want,’ says founder and CSO Jake Nickell. ‘Having a community involved in the entire process in the way that your business works is really sustainable for a growing business because of the word of mouth aspect.’

The power of that advocacy is evidenced by the fact that 40% of Threadless’ business now comes from outside the US – countries where marketing spend has been zero.

Know your timescale and make it clear right from the start. Consumers will be disappointed if they don’t get what they expect / Short-term campaigns are a great place for brands to learn about what communities can deliver. A clear exit strategy needs to be developed, including a chance for fans to stay in touch / Recruitment is expensive and members can take time to relax and get to know each other (and the brand). The real value of communities both financially and in terms of the quality of the interaction is long term / Successful long-term communities will deliver more ROI than successful short-term communities / Communities can also give rise to new brands and products. New businesses can be developed in this space /
Contagious' mantra since we launched in 2004 is that brand communications should be useful, relevant or entertaining - and sometimes ideally all three. This is especially applicable to communities.

The best are those that give their members a real reason to join and participate, whether that is a belief in the greater good or for personal reward. Sometimes people sign up in order to have their say in the development of the brand, or to express themselves more creatively. Sometimes they seek help and support, from experts or just other people like them. And sometimes it's just about having fun. In this section, we've brought together a selection of case studies, divided across these different areas, where we believe brands have been getting it right.

6.1 / Cause & Reward
Pepsi / Refresh Everything

Pepsi pulled its advertising in the 2010 Super Bowl in favour of a digital and community-based approach, supported by its agency TBWA\ChiatDay, Los Angeles. The latest iteration in the brand's ongoing Refresh Everything campaign saw Pepsi use its Super Bowl budget of US$20 million to fund a CSR initiative, bringing its 23 year investment in the big game to an end.

The original Refresh Everything campaign launched at Obama's inauguration, tying into the country's mood of optimism, running in collaboration with GOOD (www.good.is), a collective of individuals, business and non profits dedicated to pushing the world forward. Refresh Everything now asks users to submit big ideas to its website (www.refresheverything.com) where the community then votes to decide which causes are most worthy of funding.

Suggestions range across health, arts, culture, charity, ecology, education and neighbourhood improvements. $1.3m is being given out each month, split into two grants of $250,000 and ten grants of $50,000, $25,000 and $5,000. In the campaign's first month it
received an average 1000 submissions every 72 hours; however, in the second month the rate had increased to 1000 submissions every 16 hours.

Pepsi also managed to maintain its Super Bowl profile, claiming 21.6% of online chatter at the time of the game, making it the second most buzzed about Super Bowl brand despite not running an ad. The campaign has claimed over a billion media impressions to date, including 44 million blog mentions, 70 million tweets and 300,000 new Facebook fans.

The project has been extended thanks to ties with If I Can Dream, a reality TV show tracking five youngsters trying to make it big in Hollywood, which will be shown online across sites such as Hulu and MySpace. In fact, Pepsi’s online advertising spend will increase by 60% compared to 2009. Frank Cooper, SVP and chief consumer engagement officer, Pepsi-Cola North American Beverages, explains: ‘In 2010, each of our beverage brands has a strategy and marketing platform that will be less about a singular event, less about a moment, more about a movement.’ (Featured in Contagious 22)

www.refresheverything.com

Doritos / Bring Slow Dancing Back

Doritos wanted to extend the snack brand’s popularity in the US and UK in Argentina. To do so, it created a social movement, based on the idea that, thanks to the internet and social networking, young people find it more difficult to get up close and personal.

Working with BBDO, Buenos Aires, it created an online petition that urged discos and radio stations to bring back the slow dance. This was backed by TV commercials, a presence on social networks including Facebook, MySpace and Taringa, and giveaways of CDs and condoms. The petition amassed 500,000 signatures in just two weeks.

However, the campaign’s real success sprang from fans claiming the movement for themselves – resulting in the largest ever flash-mob in Latin America. 7,000 people took part in a giant slow dance under Argentina’s largest mirror ball in the Planetarium.

Doritos became one of the top three preferred youth brands in Argentina and the campaign has since been extended with a raunchy follow-up – a branded room in the Buenos Aires’ popular JJ Motel to see if the amorous young souls could make it to a second date. 100 couples used the room while 1,500 visited its recreation online. (Featured in Contagious 19)

http://quevuelvanloslentos.blogspot.com

Courvoisier / The Future 500

Now in its third year, Courvoisier The Future 500 is an exclusive ‘members only’ branded social network of UK entrepreneurs and innovators across a wide industry cross-sector.

In keeping with Courvoisier’s history of recognising and rewarding inspirational individuals, the community was set up as ‘a platform for Britain’s brightest talents to connect, share their vision, inspire one another and ultimately collaborate to achieve even greater success’.

The Beam-owned cognac brand invested over £1m in the venture, split between building the site, a media partnership with UK Sunday newspaper, The Observer, and Courvoisier-sponsored offline networking events.

Membership is limited to a maximum of 1,000 members, hand-selected twice a year by Courvoisier’s ‘Network Ambassadors’.

As well as the ‘talkability’ the publication of The Future 500 list gives the brand, there is additional
value in the many relationships Courvoisier is establishing within this influential set of people. The community not only ensures that Courvoisier is associated with the UK’s most talented people, but in helping these bright young things at an early stage of their career, encourages them to feel warm towards the brand – and talk about it amongst their peers.

One fruitful collaboration saw Aiden Byrne, double-Michelin starred head chef at London hotel The Dorchester, team up with fellow member and co-founder of web TV company pod3.tv Neil Fairbrother on a web series about the best of British food, Made in Great Britain. Beam Global UK brand manager for Courvoisier, Claire Richards, explained: ‘This collaboration epitomises what the network was set up to do - allow forward-thinking, like-minded people from different industries to help each other to move their careers forward. Through exclusive offers, events and mentoring, Courvoisier is encouraging all members to realise their greatness and fulfil their potential.’

www.courvoisierthefuture500.com

Marmite / Marmarati

In March 2010, Unilever-owned yeast extract Marmite launched its extra-strong spread, Marmite XO.

In keeping with its long-term love/hate strategy, it marshalled its most ardent supporters into a secret society called the Marmarati. Members of this mysterious society attended an exclusive tasting event in London towards the end of 2009 which helped to create the new spread. Their blog and social media posts around Marmite XO helped to spread the word in the large online and offline community of Marmite-lovers, and the smaller, but no less significant group of haters.

Marmite’s already impressive Facebook population from 250,000 to over 262,000.

Marmite also secured tons of PR, ensuring that its brand – and the community of fans who had helped to create XO – stayed highly visible. (Contagious subscribers, see Marmite case study, Contagious 22.)

www.marmarati.org

IKEA / Facebook Showroom

For the launch of a new store in Malmö, Sweden, IKEA developed a simple community-based competition that took advantage of the spaces and tools already familiar to its audience.

Photo tagging is a popular feature of Facebook. Whether it’s tagging family members on a meal out or paralytic friends on a night out, it’s become a major part of users’ behaviour.

Launched through London-based social media agency We Are Social and Splendid Communications, the Marmarati saw around 700 people clamouring at its doors, jostling to join and potentially win one of 200 beautifully packaged handmade jars of the new spread.

The website attracted 21,000 visits in four weeks. Across social media, an estimated 650,000 people came into contact with the campaign. What’s more, the launch boosted
new store’s manager, Gordon Gustavsson, and over a two week period uploaded photos of the new store’s showrooms.

Users who had befriended Gordon could then tag themselves on a specific item in the photo, and the ones who tagged it first, won it.

Facebook’s own in-built seeding mechanism helped to spread the campaign further. As soon as a user tagged themselves on a photo, a notification appeared on their wall, which could then be read by their network of friends, who might then decide to participate themselves, repeating the sequence and creating a ripple effect whereby hundreds more got to see it - and potentially win an item from IKEA’s interactive catalogue for themselves. (Featured in Contagious 22) www.facebook.com/ikeagordon

**Vitamin Water / Flavor Creator**

To help the brand come up with a new flavour for its vitamin packed H2O drink, Coca-Cola-owned Vitamin Water reached out to its fans on Facebook via a crowd-sourcing contest.

A cleverly put together ‘Flavor Creator Lab’ app not only allowed users to build their idea for the winning flavour, but also aggregated buzz from Google News, Twitter, Flickr, and Foodgawker to allow the user to see the top 10 flavours in contention. The more users tweeted and blogged about their flavour, the more chance it had of making it onto the top 10 list.

Users could then vote on their favourite flavour, which eventually made it onto the shelves, with the winner receiving $5000 cash for their concoction of black cherry, lime, coffee and assorted nutrients.

After the flavour had been chosen the designing and branding began. Using the same app, participants could create a label for the winning product, tweaking the blurb, graphics and most importantly, creating the name, with the winner being picked by Curtis ‘50 Cent’ Jackson and country star Carrie Westwood. If the love affair with social sites wasn’t clear enough, the winner emerged in the form of the ‘Connect’ drink - or the flavour of Facebook, according to producers.

6.2 / Listen & Serve

**Dell / IdeaStorm**

When Dell launched IdeaStorm in 2007, the first word on many mouths was ‘Digg’ – the tech giant created a CRM site modelled (admittedly) on the popular link aggregation company.

What they didn’t expect, though, was the nature of engagement Dell would initiate with its customers and the repercussions in its business.

IdeaStorm functions in much the same way as Digg: an idea is proposed and site visitors vote it up or down. Dell monitors, responds to, and, as best it can, implements user suggestions.

Dell built the site on Salesforce.com’s CRM platform, along with its consulting arm, based on the broad understanding the hardware maker interacts with over three million customers daily.

Soon after launch, Dell announced a similar platform for its workers, Employeestorm. In almost three years, the company has hosted over 15,000 ideas, with over 500 implemented.

It’ll be interesting to see where IdeaStorm moves next; long-time leader Vida Killian left in late January for Seattle’s Starbucks. But before she did, in a presentation to Dell’s Executive Social Marketing Boot Camp last year, she suggested the next evolution of the community relies on social network integration (showing a mock-up of a Facebook interface) and topic-specific applications, like Dell’s Social Innovation Competition, which, in partnership with the University of Texas, will award $50,000 to a pressing social issue that makes it through a series of rounds of expert judging.

www.ideastorm.com
Starbucks / My Starbucks Idea

Along similar lines to Dell’s IdeaStorm, Starbucks’ My Starbucks Idea took one of the most picky consumer groups in the world - gourmet coffee lovers - and asked them what they’d tweak about the brand experience, from taste to social responsibility.

From its March 2008 launch, the ideas came hot and heavy. Over 80,000 have been proposed, with Starbucks citing implementations including the introduction of the green splash stick, Starbucks VIP cards and free cups of coffee when you buy beans or it’s your birthday and you’re a loyalty card carrier. In an April Fools spoof this year, the company even announced it was going to introduce new ‘Plenta’ and ‘Micra’ sizes in stores in the US in response to customer requests through the My Starbucks Idea site.

However, recent criticism has been levelled against Starbucks for highlighting and implementing ideas the company already had been pursuing, such as the splash sticks, which were launched first in Japan. Starbucks claimed them as a user-submitted idea that it had implemented, but, according to the Brand Autopsy blog, it was already being rolled out in another part of the globe.

While the company deserves credit for responding to consumer desires, it needs to be clear as to whether the ideas from consumers become real, rolling projects, or merely things that already fit into its development cycle and can be delivered. Either way is a plus for the consumer, but with all communities online, transparency is integral.

http://mystarbucksidea.force.com

Zappos /

Broadly, with big strokes and a seemingly all-good company core, Zappos has created one of the widest-ranging notions of community in the entirety of 21st century business.

And they haven’t done it with avatars and profiles, bolt-on social networking architecture, or cheesy referral engines.

Zappos Core Values /

1. Deliver WOW Through Service
2. Embrace and Drive Change
3. Create Fun and A Little Weirdness
4. Be Adventurous, Creative, and Open-Minded
5. Pursue Growth and Learning
6. Build Open and Honest Relationships With Communication
7. Build a Positive Team and Family Spirit
8. Do More With Less
9. Be Passionate and Determined
10. Be Humble

By sticking to its core values (see list above), the online apparel and footwear retailer has set the standard for customer service, and in doing the little things to treat each user well they’ve cultivated a cadre of fans joined by the strong-yet-temporary bonds of good will.

The Zappos culture is so strong you can feel it in the tiniest transaction, from your first purchase, in a medium completely devoid of human interaction, until something goes wrong. It’s how their copy is written on the site and in emails, and how they’ve designed the process.

Before long, you’ve bought a few more pairs, sent a few back painlessly, and you slide over to the company blog and watch the HR department do a jig on St. Patrick’s day. And you’re hooked.

We’ve always known a happy customer spreads the word, and, like the best ideas, Zappos’
approaches often seem very obvious - easy returns, periodic free next-day shipping, online galleries of photos of customers’ pets (‘furry customers’) and kids (‘customers in training’) playing in Zappos gear and keeping employees, especially the outward facing ones, cheerful and happy.

The company values fuelled the culture, which was then communicated and formed a community of fans. Zappos was among the first to bring the open hearth to the web, and went from zero to a billion dollars in sales and an acquisition by Amazon in nine years. (See feature article, Contagious 18)

www.zappos.com

BlackBerry / MyBlackBerry

RIM’s MyBlackBerry community, launched in 2009, allows users to set up a profile in the usual way, but rather than acting as a strictly social hub like Facebook or MySpace, the main aim is to share BlackBerry-focused tips and information.

Users with questions about how to post images to Flickr direct from their handset, for example, could throw the question out to the MyBlackBerry network to find a quick, tried and tested solution.

It also provides a forum for niggles and complaints that BlackBerry can monitor, allowing them the opportunity to either intervene with help, or to use the insight and feedback to guide the development of future hardware or apps.

A nice detail of the MyBlackBerry service is that the information is customised to be compatible with whichever handset users own, making sure members only receive content that’s relevant to them.

http://my.blackberry.com
P&G / Vocalpoint

Vocalpoint is a community of 350,000 US mothers brought together through Procter & Gamble’s in-house word-of-mouth marketing division, Tremor.

The community works with P&G brands such as Crest and Olay in exchanging wisdom through and among ‘connector moms’ who have willingly signed up to Vocalpoint. P&G sends new products to members and regularly invites them to complete short surveys. Their feedback provides P&G with valuable insight which, in turn, informs the company’s new product development and marketing.

To reward their efforts, women who sign up to Vocalpoint receive promotions and offers in addition to the informal tips and advice that are shared across the community. Typical content includes how mothers can bond with their sons and a forum on how to dissuade ants from entering the home.

P&G uses Vocalpoint to spread the word about new products, and it was an integral part of the launch of Crest Weekly Clean Intensive Cleaning Paste, for example.

In addition to its hub site, Vocalpoint has nearly 45,000 Facebook fans, and openly invites bloggers to be more involved with spreading the word about the community and its work.

www.vocalpoint.com

airBaltic / Facebook

When low-cost rivals such as Ryanair started to erode airBaltic’s dominant position in its home market, the Latvian airline needed to take action.

It re-engineered its business from traditional national airline flying mainly Latvian customers to and from Riga to that of a transit airline flying customers from all over the world to all over the world, via Riga.

And to speak to this new global audience, the airline revamped its traditional one-way communication approach as well, with the help of Riga-based media agency Inspired. Recognising that in this era of social media, the experiences of air travel passengers (especially in the event of delays, lost baggage etc.) can quickly spread via social network profiles, airBaltic decided to become part of the conversation.

In April 2009, the brand established company profiles on Twitter, Facebook and YouTube and recruited specialist in-house staff to manage the process. The idea was to empower customers to contribute to important decisions, such as new routes, branding and customer service, and thereby create a loyal brand advocate base that would not only spread the word about airBaltic, but also help to solve real issues.

Low-cost solutions such as contests, quizzes, discounts and in-site advertising were used to attract fans, such as a competition offering a 10% discount for every 1,000 new Facebook fan and special deals available only on Facebook. User-generated content, such as photo competitions when new routes opened, was encouraged and rewarded.

Within six months, the Facebook page had attracted 6,300 fans, and the number now stands at over 25,000 — a massive achievement for a relatively small and globally unknown airline. The platform provides airBaltic with an ‘always-on’ think-tank to help solve business challenges and provides customers with a much faster channel for reporting problems.

Its social media activity has helped airBaltic to become more nimble and opportunistic too — it has dramatically shortened its response time to customers and, when Finnair went on strike recently, the Latvian airline took advantage to promote its own services. The activity has also supported airBaltic’s transformation from local airline to transit service, with nearly 50% of its passengers now using Riga as a connection hub.

www.facebook.com/airBaltic
6.3 / Self-Expression

Burberry / Art of the Trench

The Art of the Trench is an online showcase of the fashion brand's iconic raincoat, as worn and captured by stylish individuals the world over.

Burberry chose Scott Schuman, creator of super-influential style blog The Sartorialist, to select and photograph the first 100 images used in the launch of the site. Schuman has a great eye for a beautifully put together outfit, and his knack for capturing the unique elegance of his subjects - who are found simply by scouring the streets of cities he visits - has attracted a slavish and ever-expanding following.

Users can also upload images of themselves wearing Burberry trench coats and can comment on other uploads or mark them as favourite.

In collaborating with The Sartorialist, Burberry effectively guaranteed the success of the site, and stats for the first week it went live confirm the wisdom of their choice. Within a week of launch, the site had gained 200,000 unique visitors from 177 countries, adding up to three million page views. Consumers spend an average of five and a half minutes on the site, sampling 12 pages.

Most importantly, the initiative is credited with driving monthly sales of trench coats up 85% and overall sales up 12%.

Once a chain has been created, the user who uploads the picture must choose a tag or detail to mark as inspiration for the next photo; other users then have one week to submit photos under that tag. The original user then has one week to choose the best image submitted, and so it continues.

Users can browse and submit their work to existing photochains or start their own. They can comment on or tag photos as their favourite or 'follow' a photographer with the site automatically updating them when any new activity from that user is posted.

The photochains live at the World of EOS website where more than 17,000 members have so far registered and dwell time averages five to nine minutes, according to Canon.

The initiative helped Canon EOS Australia achieve 54% market share by value in 2009, while Canon DSLR sales revenue increased year-on-year by 44%. The site is now a hub for Canon’s creative projects. Michael Canning, creative group head at Leo Burnett Australia, says: ‘When you inject the right idea online, its potential to spread and build communities can be huge.’ (Featured in Contagious 22)


Canon EOS / Photochains

Leo Burnett Sydney helped Canon re-establish itself as a market leader in digital SLR (DSLR) photography with the launch of ‘photochains’ – an online platform where a tagged detail in one shot serves as a brief for the next.
Three campaign phases ensured wide engagement, asking fans to submit their own digitally-created artwork toward an online gallery; create music using an online mixing app, and finally upload and edit their own films. Creative tips and production utilities at the site showcased HP products in the process.

The icing on the cake came in the form of the ultimate prize for top talents – a spot on Hong-Kong reality TV show, *HP Space*, which followed the progress of young creatives, one winner claiming a $50,000 prize plus a job on the set of the movie *Bubblegum Crisis*.

The campaign helped HP build market share in China to 18.4% by Q3 2009, from a pre-campaign point of 10.4% in 2007. The first stage, in 2008, drew 6.68 million unique site visitors, with 37,000 works of art uploaded and 764,000 votes on the submissions. Sales increased 92% and 108% year-over-year for HP desktop computers and notebooks respectively, while brand recognition improved too, with a survey finding 69% of young people classed HP a ‘cool’ brand. (See HP case study, *Contagious* 20)

www.hpmystage.com.cn

**LEGO / CLICK / Universe**

Given that LEGO is a brand built literally in the hands of its consumers, it is perhaps little surprise that the Billund-based brick manufacturer has become something of an expert in cultivating communities.

Most recently, the brand launched an integrated campaign through *Pereira & O’Dell*, San Francisco which centres on a website where fans can celebrate the moment when ideas just ‘click’. Visitors can join guest contributors by uploading photos and videos as well as sharing their creative inspiration in Tweets delivered directly to the site using the hashtag #legoclick.

Traffic is being driven to the collaborative community via a viral short film directed by *Blue Source*, which was viewed over 1.5 million times online in the first two weeks following its launch. A free iPhone application - LEGO Photo - enables users to render photographs into a brick mosaic and was downloaded over two million times in January 2010 alone.

Without doubt the brand’s most ambitious community, however, will be the much-anticipated LEGO Universe - plunging users deep into a brick-shaped virtual world. Developed by *NetDevil* and set to launch in the second half of 2010, this new massively multiplayer online game (MMOG) has been designed to be a seamless adaptation of the LEGO philosophy with one simple rule: if you can imagine it, then you can build it.

The subscription-based game will require players to collaborate in order to progress; however, those who prove most prolific will be rewarded with LEGO Universe currency – plastic! This can then be exchanged for different pieces to build more elaborate creations. There will be a wide selection of existing LEGO lines to play with along with some new variations which will launch exclusively in the game. (Featured *Contagious* 22. See also case study, *Contagious* 17).

www.legoclick.com
http://universe.lego.com
Sunsilk / Gang of Girls

With rising competition from new entrants to the shampoo market in India, Hindustan Lever’s Sunsilk brand needed to take a fresh approach – one that would engage its target audience of young 18 to 25-year-old women, rather than just offering them freebies and discounts.

Based on the insight that girls love to gang together to express what they feel, Sunsilk decided to turn its existing website into India’s first online community for girls.

Developed by Mumbai-based agency bcweb-wise, Sunsilk’s Gang of Girls was built on the three pillars of self-expression, interactivity and hair & fashion content. As well as a rich resource of information about hair and beauty, the site offers a wealth of tools that enable girls to express themselves and interact with each other.

Features include ‘GOG TV’, where members can upload and share their videos as well as create their own movies using pre-shot clips; ‘Get Spotted’ enables them to showcase their talents and win prizes based on how others rate them; and the ‘Be A DJ’ feature allows them to create their own music mixes. One of the most active areas of the site is ‘Girl Talk’ - a forum that gives girls the space to discuss everything from styling tips to the latest in entertainment. Meanwhile, blogs by female celebrities give members a peek into the lives and minds of their idols.

The site has achieved over 700,000 members split across 42,000 gangs and each spending over 10 minutes on the site per visit. The success of Sunsilk Gang of Girls in India has given way to offshoots in other countries in South and South-East Asia.

www.sunsilkgangofgirls.com

6.4 / Support & Utility

Nescafé / 3in1

Nescafé 3in1 was Vietnam’s market leader in coffee, but realised it needed a better emotional connection with consumers. There are over 22 million web users in Vietnam, but brands have so far been hesitant to create campaigns with a digital core. To target ‘job starters’ aged 25 to 32, Nescafé created both an online and offline community to offer career advice.

Conversations centred around topics such as the education and presentation skills. The community offered a platform for discussion where people could talk freely and openly and top bloggers were enlisted to respond to and moderate the debate. All post were replied to within 15 minutes.

Once the community was well established online, Nescafé created coffee shops where people could meet and discuss topics in greater depth. Key debates were filmed and posted on the website.

The community site has become the most visited branded site in Vietnam to date with over 360,000 unique visitors and 1.1m total visits. In a period when the category sector shrank overall, Nescafé’s 3in1 market share grew by 5%.

www.cungtrochuyen.com

Pampers / Pampers Village

With more than 1.5 million unique visitors a month, Pampers’ challenge isn’t necessarily getting more traffic, it’s convincing the moms who cruise through the Pampers Village for coupons to stay a while, perhaps generate some media in the forums, and stay vested in the site and Procter & Gamble brands post-diapers.

Part of this includes bundled savings for other P&G products, including the Gifts to Grow rewards programme, which allows shoppers to earn loyalty points from codes on packaging and other site actions such as signing up for newsletters. These can in turn be converted into various baby-relevant products. 900 points, for example, turn into personalized 5x7 birthday invitations from Shutterfly.

In addition to tuning in to Pampers’ various offers and media-like channels, Pampers Village
allows users to create their own blogs, participate in forums and even meet up offline. In an interview with *Contagious*, P&G’s global team leader, digital business strategy, Lucas Watson explained: ‘Where consumers have given our brands permission to provide value, service, utility and information, there’s scope for the brand to add value to consumers lives. For instance, new moms on Pampers Village crave information… but on top of that, moms want to connect with their peers around having kids, one of the most amazing life experiences. Their needs and desires extend beyond diapers into finding a babysitter, or learning about how best to approach pre-school. If they want us to, we can even help new Moms, with assistance from Google and MySpace, to meet up for a playdate with several other Moms who also have small children within a one mile radius. ’

Top activity is on the site’s Bargain Hunters section, followed by Potty Training – which, interestingly, addresses how to get cheaper Pampers as well as how to stop using them entirely. Which brings up one of Pampers’ major challenges: what consumers do when they outgrow certain communities, and how to develop enough connection with them that they don’t want to leave? (See case study, *Contagious* 22)

**US Navy / Navy for Moms**

Identifying family and community as the backbone of military life, US Navy worked with Detroit-based agency Campbell-Ewald to reach out to mothers via the Navy for Moms online community.

Launching on 1 March 2008, the site is hosted on the Ning network, allowing open access for mothers to create their own social network page, interact freely and frankly with each other, plus create sub-groups of their own.

Mothers of prospective recruits were able to turn to existing Navy Moms within the community for advice, who in turn could share their stories, feelings, fears and friendship with people in a similar position.

A hands-off approach has been key to the activity’s success, and the naval community has taken the site to heart. A strong indication of success is in the offline activity: events across the US allow members to meet in real life and encourage new members. More than 32,000 members have signed up, with more than 7,000 blog posts uploaded to the site by moms keen to share.

[www.navyformoms.com](http://www.navyformoms.com)

**Special K / Be Victorious / Victory Project**

Back in 2008, Kellogg’s announced that digital ROI more than doubled that of traditional spend – with an online Special K diet plan central to a move toward lasting consumer engagement.

The confidence inspired by tangible success helped the brand evolve its web-based content in New Year 2010, leaning out of the frame to form an online community for women, led by women.

An overarching ‘Be Victorious’ campaign, developed by Leo Burnett, Chicago, featured print and TV spots notable for a near-total absence of product or logo - and instead focusing on the stories of real women. This was supported by the subtly branded online Victory Project.

The community element follows this sisterly approach, with visitors to the MSN-hosted Victory Project site not asked to become a fan of the brand, but instead to follow or friend the four women filming and blogging their lives for the project on either Twitter or Facebook.
Discussion forums, healthy eating and living tips and plenty of video content surrounding the women’s progress complete an evolved package for Special K and its audience. http://thevictoryproject.msn.com

Durex / Ora!
As part of a broader strategy to position itself as a global sex brand, Durex launched a global online community Ora!

The community site features expert and user contributions from around the world as well as interactive elements designed so that both partners can improve their performance. Typical fare includes a quiz to find out if your partner is cheating, an article about how to write erotic fiction, and advice on reviving a flagging libido.

By establishing it as ‘part website, part community and part magazine for anyone who wants to make their sex life more fulfilling’, Durex maintains a broad remit for Ora!, a beta site managed by Manchester-based agency Code Computerlove.

Ora! also assists Durex in maintaining relevance with older people who perhaps no longer use condoms. In 2007, to target this group, it launched its Play range of lubricants and gels to associate its brand with fulfilling sex. It was a successful move: Play became a £40m brand in just two years.

As well as being a destination site for advice on a potentially embarrassing issue, Ora! also gives Durex an appropriate platform to promote Play products. www.myora.com

BFGoodrich / Nation of Go
Petrol heads and car communities have been around for almost as long as the automobile itself. You’ll find a fan blog or forum dedicated to just about any car out there, from a Pagani to a Prius. And importantly, this happens both down the local pub car park and on the web.

Realising that this keen bunch doesn’t just congregate on the net, tyre manufacturer BFGoodrich showed a sound understanding of its target consumers by creating an online community that was focused on offline, tyre screeching fun.

Nationofgo.com, through Martin Agency in Richmond, Virginia, was created to connect users on the open road, and encourage them to share and discover new routes and great drives they had found. A neat iPhone application could be activated at the start of a backroad blast, recording the user’s route and plotting it along a map using the phone’s in-built GPS. The driver can stop off at any point to photograph a sharp bend or blind crest, or any other features they feel other users should be aware of. This can then be uploaded to the community for all to see, share and discuss.

Users can also list driving races and events in the area, turning the site into a driving hub as well as community.

The site attracted 50,000 unique visitors and over 1500 members in its first month and thousands of drives, photos, videos and events are being contributed by this thriving community. (Featured in Contagious 21) www.nationofgo.com
Nike’s True City iPhone app delivers premium geo-tagged content for people looking to get the inside track on a city. Nike ‘Insiders’ share knowledge of happening places and events, and users can add their own favourite spots, in real-time, by marking them on a map and sharing them via Facebook Connect.

Contagious caught up with the team at Nike’s digital agency AKQA to get the lowdown…

Contagious / How can fans communicate with each other on True City?
AKQA / Fans reveal their personal favourite ‘hidden’ locations to the True City community, inspired by existing postings from Nike Insiders and other active users. It’s all about getting motivated to reveal your ‘true city’, and spreading the True City word by sharing your hottest finds with Facebook and email contacts.

How much of the interaction happens via mobile – all of it?
In a nutshell, yes. The app is designed to make it easy to tag and share locations on-the-fly. All the most important interactions are mobile-based.

What are the additional issues in creating a community around mobile devices?
True City was devised with the rapidly-evolving context of ‘smartphone’ usage very much in mind – the platform gave birth to the idea – so the focus has been very much on realising opportunities rather than facing issues. The time/location specificity that 3G iPhone functionality gives consumers means that they can create their ‘true city’ as they live it, making it a far more rich, immediate and involving experience than a non-mobile community based on the same premise could be.

How are you assessing the success of the activity?
It has varied with the developing story of the app. To begin with, the level of conversation and intrigue generated by the teaser clips in the blogosphere was the key factor in measuring True City’s success. Since launch, we’ve mainly been interested in tracking user participation – how much and how often they submit and share new locations.

What is the lifespan of True City?
True City will live on as long as the community continues to embrace and value it. It was devised to grow organically over time, providing a valuable platform for diverse and game-changing activity, both for users and for Nike.

Will it be rolled out to other areas?
Based on the app’s early success across Europe, it’s definitely being considered.

How does True City work with other types of marketing activity?
It’s important to stress that True City is a constantly evolving, two-way channel of communication and brand expression – not a single campaign. Nike plans to share multiple stories and product innovations with True City members, redefining its brand-audience relationship in the process.

www.niketruecity.com
Recognising that arguments waged in the pub over real football matches are often replicated online over virtual ones, EA created FIFA EARTH to mark the launch of new football sim, FIFA 10. **Wieden+Kennedy**, Amsterdam created the online hub which acts as part data-visualisation tool and (thanks to Twitter) part news disseminator.

Fans and players can use the large globe-come-ball which dominates the landing page, to navigate their way across activity in different regions. As well as keeping up to date with FIFA news such as new downloadable content, the portal allows users to discuss their own games and even share replays of their finest goals.

FIFA 10 topped the UK chart from its launch on 2 October 2009. Sales compared with FIFA 09 are up by 90% in Germany and Spain and 100% in Poland. In the long term, however, EA hopes to further blur the lines between the real and virtual worlds, encouraging users to replicate genuine games and compare results within FIFA EARTH.

The site has also become a platform for advertisers to directly target the young audience. Brands such as **Cadbury** have created campaigns starring the actors from the show and involved fans with requests for user generated content.

In just six months, the site saw more than half a million comments, videos, and photo uploads, from a community of over 250,000. There were over 2.5m visits and 32m page views with the average user engaging with the site for 15 minutes. [www.guaridaazul.com](http://www.guaridaazul.com)
of friends or housemates – and enjoy homemade goods. The proud bakers can upload images of their creations to a Flickr gallery containing an assortment of delicious creations www.flickr.com/photos/lurpak.

Paul Colman, planning director at Wieden+Kennedy, London, explains ‘The latest campaign celebrates the pride that comes from cooking something yourself. To give the campaign real authenticity we used food cooked for us by food bloggers. People whose food we thought looked utterly delicious and who shared Lurpak’s passion for good food. Engaging the food community in this way created a much deeper and richer conversation around the campaign and a deeper level of engagement evidenced by the additional coverage we received on blogs, twitter (with people spotting and noting locations of the posters under #piewatch) as well as Facebook. The campaign encouraged people to get involved and start baking themselves with Bake Club, a site which allows you to form and run your own bake club, selecting a bake day, rating the bake and so on.’

Lurpak enhances the experience of organising a Bake Club, sending reminder emails to participants, selecting and notifying the baker and then providing an easy system through which to rate the delicious treats. There are currently over 3,000 people baking through the club.

Lurpak is currently the UK’s top butter brand, a position it has held since 2007. The brand is worth £229m with a market penetration of 40.3%.

www.bakeclub.co.uk

Suntory / Horotter

As Japanese drinkers become more frugal, alcohol manufacturers are quick to adapt by offering new, more economical options. Younger drinkers in particular are looking to save money on going out, without sacrificing their social lives, resulting in a boom in online ‘nomikai’, or drinking parties. Some set up Skype nomikais with their friends, while nomikai Tweeting is also on the rise, with drinkers meeting under hashtags like #wanabeer and #twinomi, and sharing a brew from wherever they happen to be.

One of the first beverage brands to react to this trend was Suntory. Their low-alcohol Chu-Hi Horoyoi (or ’Tipsy’) is positioned as a drink to be enjoyed at home, alone. Suntory created an online community, encouraging Japanese youths to share their drinking experiences on the web via Horotter.com. Upon entering the site, visitors must specify their age, sex, and of course - favourite Horoyoi drink.

Rather than using a webcam, drinkers create an online persona by registering and customizing an avatar. They can then visit different areas of the Horotter world, entering different chat rooms and zooming in on other avatars, while the Twitter posts of fellow drinkers float by on clouds, all accompanied by a suitably dreamy soundtrack.

Horotter hosts regular ‘kampai’ or online toasts, and has introduced promotions, such as the option to share a tipple with online celebrity guests, or win free cans of the new Horoyoi white sour drink. www.horotter.com

Honda K-tra

Japanese youth are no longer purchasing cars but choosing to spend their money on electronics, fashion and other goods. Honda wanted to encourage these younger consumers to build a relationship with the auto brand and foster brand loyalty.

To do so, Honda worked with Dentsu Japan to create a community game that changed a mobile phone into a vehicle. Essentially, the execution was
a mobile gaming community whereby players created a movatar (mobile avatar) which travelled around Japan by hitching lifts on other people’s mobile phones and collecting souvenirs.

Their movatar also emailed them occasionally with updates and kept a daily diary about their adventures across Japan. Players could also connect with each other by sending messages through their movatar or online through a microsite.

The campaign amassed 20,000 users after two months and over six million page views in total. The leading movatar travelled close to 30,000 kms! The campaign was a Yellow Pencil winner at the 2009 D&AD awards. (Featured in Contagious 20)

http://world.honda.com/group/Japan

Maple Leaf / Republic of Bacon

Toronto-based agency john st. developed its campaign for Maple Leaf bacon on the disproportionate love that people have for the meat. All (except vegetarians) are welcome to the Republic of Bacon – a website dedicated to bacon-lovers around the world. The site hosts a range of Bacon-based tributes from a casino, blog, videos and even a museum of modern bacon art.

Paul Constantakis, a writer at john st., explains the idea: ‘When we first began our research, we quickly discovered a cult-like following behind bacon. Everything you could imagine, we found it – bacon bras, bacon band-aids, bacon blogs, recipes, Super Bowl trophies made of bacon; and the list went on.’

The campaign was backed by integrated elements, including TV spots which directed viewers to the site and a comic strip for bacon-lovers. A week’s supply of bacon has also been given away every day on the site from November 2009 to March 2010 via a Bacon Casino, with a grand prize of a decade’s worth of Bacon.

Patrick Shing, art director on the campaign, explains: ‘Our idea was to harness all the passion and enthusiasm for bacon into one place where bacon lovers can call home.’ To date the site has received over 300,000 visits.

www.republicofbacon.com
www.facebook.com/officialrepublicofbaconpage
Joseph Jaffe is chief interruptor of Powered, Inc., a full service social media agency. He is author of three books: the best-selling *Life after the 30-second spot*, *Join the Conversation* and most recently, *Flip the Funnel: How to use existing customers to gain new ones*. He blogs and podcasts at Jaffe Juice and also hosts a web video show, Jaffe Juice TV. *Contagious* asked him to explain his take on how brands can use communities to grow their business.

The word 'community' has become a big part of my life for many reasons and I'd like to take you on my own journey, which in a way demonstrates the rise, fall and resurrection of what could conceivably be a saviour for marketing as we know it.

I've written three books now. Whereas each focuses on its own distinct subject areas – namely new media and non-traditional marketing approaches; social media or conversational marketing; and finally the mission critical role and purpose of customer service and customer experience - they also have several common themes.

Up until now, I identified these common threads as 'change', 'innovation' and 'optimization.' So where does community fit?

**Customer-centric communities**

In *Life after the 30-second spot*, one of the bold, new approaches was that of 'communal marketing' or marketing to – or through – a community. This was the dawn and introduction of co-creation, crowdsourcing or recognition of the 'wisdom of the crowds'.

In *Join the Conversation*, I referred to community as one of the three pillars (along with dialogue and partnership) that helped brands quite literally 'join the conversation.'

In *Flip the Funnel*, community makes an emphatic resurgence, this time with a considerable new focus, purpose and promise; this time we’re talking about customer-centric or customer-driven communities; an entirely new way to look at segmentation.
The traditional marketing funnel is often characterized by the acronym known as A.I.D.A., which stands for Awareness-Interest-Desire-Action. I turned that on its head to reveal the Flipped Funnel and in doing so, created A.D.I.A. or Acknowledgment-Dialogue-Incentivization-Activation. In this case, community becomes synonymous with the second A of Activation and in the process pays tribute to a connected customer base that becomes embedded and integrated into the very marketing ecosystem that sustains, nurtures and builds the brand.


Community as the new user manual

Think about the Consumer Electronics space for a moment.

Technology is like the human brain. Figure out how to use more than 4% of its capacity and functions and you’re essentially a genius. Think about the last time you purchased a shiny digital camera or heaven forbid an HD camcorder. With your purchase you received a manual which itself probably weighed as much as the device itself. It came in 12 languages – only your native tongue might have been written in classic code breaker style, because that’s how hard it was to decipher. To this day, you’re probably doing nothing more than point-and-click (with the occasional switch over to ‘play’ to see if that red-eye-removal-thingy actually worked).

Am I wrong?

In fact, according to research in the early 90’s from R.H. Bruskin & Associates, about one-third of American VCR owners gave up programming their devices because they couldn’t understand the instructions and controls.

So much so that this has spawned the term ‘Flashing 12!’ According to the Urban Dictionary, ‘A “Flashing 12” is a person with no technical inclinations, inept in all things technological. The name comes from the fact that when you walk into their house their VCR is Flashing 12:00, because they can not figure out how to program it.’

There’s a reason why Apple swept the hearts, minds and wallets of the inhabitants of planet Earth with a device that was so simple, so basic and so elementary that it would most likely have been rejected from the movie Back to the Future, for not being believable enough.

There’s a reason why the Flip Camera has ‘borrowed’ the same rationale from Apple’s treasure trove.

Panasonic decided to change all that with a community for all (but not limited to) consumers who wanted to get more out of their purchase.

The vision of the community was a powerful one which tapped into restoring a bit of humanity into the Consumer Electronics space to counter an almost unhealthy imbalance of technology driven dominance: Can you imagine purchasing a state of the art digital camera, 3D HD TV or HD camcorder and receiving nothing more than a piece of paper containing a single URL and an invitation to join a community of like-minded people who – through a sense of connectedness, camaraderie and purpose – join forces to educate, support, entertain and inspire one another with tips, tools, tricks and tutorials associated with literally ‘living in high definition’ and how living in high definition changes EVERYTHING!

If nothing else, think about how much paper would be saved from all those manuals!
Check it out at www.livinginhd.com

Panasonic / Living in HD /

Community as life changer

Or what about the most unlikely of scenarios, the weight loss category, where if you think about it, the brand’s best customer and/or advocate is probably its most ‘disloyal’ from a success, experience and results standpoint.

Think again. People on a journey to change their lives feel an incredibly strong pull to one another. Physical Weight Watchers meetings proved to be a pivotal component of the traditional brand experience, but this has changed so much since the rise and mainstreaming of the Internet and the ability to connect digitally and even virtually (in a social media environment).
The weight loss process itself (campaign) is a critical part of the journey, but so too is the maintenance phase (commitment). Actually – speaking as someone who lost 50 pounds in 2009 – a really successful transformation is when it becomes a complete life change and lifestyle shift. In this scenario, community becomes the Killer App.

It is this thinking that helped Atkins move from a simple online forum allowing limited interaction between Atkins loyalists to an open community for free (competitors charged for community access) with expert created and curated content, including a blog by their VP of Nutrition.

The goals of the community were to position Atkins as a leader in dedication to healthy living via free online tools; build dialogue and engagement with the community via permission-based opt-ins; and enable members to create an identity for themselves as well as interact with others in multiple ways.

The Atkins Community was built on the Powered platform (my new parent) and provided members with a space to access advice, tools, resources and support from other members. Members could rate/review Atkins products, chart progress and interact with a licensed nutritionist. The site was rich with professional, easy-to-navigate content – courses, notebooks, checklists, and videos – and ‘Atkins Advocates’ were on hand to reach out to new members and answer questions.

Talk is cheap. Let’s talk calories burnt, shall we? Results included:
- Explosive growth in Atkins.com registrations, which increased by more than 400% following the launch of the community element (compared to the previous year).
- More than 600,000 registered members since community inception.
- Impressive retention numbers: 19% of members that registered in 2008 returned in 2009.
- Strong results across all major KPIs in 2009. Community registrations increased by 97% in 2009 compared to 2008.

Brand or business goals in the form of that grubby word, ‘marketing’, need not be at odds with empathy, authenticity or a genuine attempt to empower human beings to connect with one another.

**Community as the new demographic**

Think about the implications on the way we profile, segment and target our communications: instead of one message lobbed to one million individual consumers, why not have one community of a million connected members? Community becomes the new demographic, when commonality becomes the glue that credibly weaves a brand together with its customer base.

This is where ‘Flip the Funnel’ comes into play. Flip the Funnel contends that it is possible to grow your business from the inside-out: by merging or marrying the two worlds of word-of-mouth and customer experience, it is possible for retention to become the new acquisition; where enthusiasts become influencers and where advocates become brand ambassadors.

The good news for you is that it’s still relatively early in the game which means there’s still time to participate, but I will warn you that there will come a time (and it’s sooner than you think), where the branded community space will be as burgeoning, cluttered and saturated as the shelf space at your local Wal-Mart or Tesco, brand page on Facebook or App Store on iTunes.

My prediction is that within the next three to five years, every self-respecting brand will have some kind of communal presence that leverages the best of digital, virtual, social and mobile. If you need a final push, get into your DeLorean time machine one final time and travel back to around 1995 to seek out that crazy digital strategist (it’s me 50 pounds heavier) that’s predicting that there will come a time soon where every self-respecting brand will have some kind of online storefront and presence called a ‘website’, which will not be a place to transplant your catalog or brochureware, but in fact will become a mission critical presence, rivaling even your bricks and mortar stores.

Turns out I was right then. And I’m right now. And you can be too.

www.powered.com
www.flipthefunnelnow.com
www.jaffejuice.com
www.jaffejuice.tv
We Are Social is a conversation agency with offices in London, Paris, Milan and Sydney. They ‘help brands to listen, understand and engage in conversations in social media’. Clients include Coca-Cola, Ford, Unilever, Microsoft, Tesco, Orange, Eurostar, Absolut and WWF. Contagious caught up with managing partner and co-founder Nathan McDonald shortly after they opened their Paris office to ask about the challenges of building communities across geographical borders.

Just about wherever you are in the world, you can order a Coke. The most ubiquitous of brands has steadily built a truly global fan base for more than 120 years.

The difference between Coca-Cola’s introduction in 1886 and today is that now those fans are talking about the brand online too.

By now, anyone involved in marketing knows that there is value in engaging with these people. A brand community often includes the most devoted fans: core customers who are the most engaged, most loyal and very likely to infect others with their obsession.

These people often have an encyclopaedic knowledge of a product – even the whole category – and their ideas can contribute to the evolution and innovation of products or simply be a way to test new features, flavours or functionality. The most active community members may even help each other out with advice and support, building trust within the community. When these kinds of communities cross borders, they can act as a 24/7 global helpdesk.

Context and culture

Whatever the purpose and geographic scope, each community will have its own rules (written and unwritten) that evolve over time. Like any form of communication, context and culture play a big part in how members of a community behave and work. This can differ according to culture and available technology in different markets and the level of sophistication and comfort in the online space.

Brands that want to understand, participate in – and perhaps create – communities now face a new set of challenges: organisational, technological and cultural.

Creating multiple brand communities across different geographies makes it harder to achieve economies of scale, and centralised marketing teams will need local input to plan, launch and manage the community.

Meanwhile a global, one size fits all approach may reduce the reliance on individual market involvement, but increase the technical complexity.

The first step in developing your strategy is understanding what communities already exist. This involves listening to the conversation across many cultures and platforms. Tools such as Radian6 can help gather the data, but there’s no replacement for a social media savvy human who’s a native speaker and interested in the relevant subculture. Only then will you get a true sense of the community dynamics.

Questions to consider include whether this network is leading or following the trends globally, or in that market? Does it reach across borders? Is it country-specific?
For every brand, the answers will be different. Lovers of global brands (Coke, McDonald’s, Nike) and fans of very specific things (say *Mad Men* or Marmite) will chat across borders.

Fans of brands like Ford, which sells different products in different ways in different regions, on the whole, probably won’t. The Fiesta Movement in the US (where bloggers were given a car for six months) is markedly different to This is Now, which got the brand involved in conversations about photography, fashion, design and architecture across Europe.

We might think Facebook (now available in more than 70 languages including Klingon and Pirate), Twitter and blogs are pretty central to social media. This is true, to an extent, and while it’s good that Facebook continues to make it easier to manage multilingual and multinational fan pages, there are still some pretty big problems for them to solve, such as fan updates in different languages all appearing on a global fan page.

There’s also the issue of some brands being inconsistent across markets in channels such as Facebook. You can work around this with different fan pages for each market, but it can get confusing for consumers. And of course, the different pages need to exist within a global strategy. It might help, when tackling a problem like this, to seek strategic advice from a specialist social media agency with experience of working on global projects.

Let’s not forget that although Facebook is growing quickly in most markets, there are some locally dominant networks that can’t be ignored such as Orkut in Brazil, Cyworld in South Korea, Nasza Klasa in Poland and Mixi in Japan. Hyves in the Netherlands has more than double the membership of Facebook in that country (7.6 million compared to 3.3 million), so for reach alone, brands should develop a presence on these platforms.

Geographical context is also crucial - and not just for cultural differences. It’s important to remember that different levels of broadband penetration and mobile usage, as well as the types of handsets used in different regions will mean that communities work in different ways.
In China, for example, the social interaction online is much more focused on BBS (Bulletin Board Systems) and instant messenger, though this is changing as local versions of Facebook such as Xiaonei appear. Getting to grips with a social campaign in China would mean getting to grips with each of these systems, as well as of course the structure and social mores of online interaction in that country.

There’s also the fact that communities are disparate. Facebook might be the place for talking about how much you love Coca-Cola, but is it the place for talking about surfing or knitting? Communities based around these kinds of activities often pre-exist elsewhere, but don’t make any assumptions: some countries may embrace niche sites, others won’t. For example, in South Korea, people tend to seek and share advice on specific topics in forums, but blogging tends to be more like a ‘digital scrapbook’ than personal opinion. Even in Europe and the US, we have niche social networks: Ravelry for crafts like knitting; Fuzzster for talking about pets and Dogster for talking about dogs in particular.

**Practicalities**

Working with international brand communities isn’t easy. But when people can so easily talk to each other, wherever they are, it’s important that global brands get it right everywhere.

This might be something of a challenge for clients. Who’s in overall control? How are budgets allocated? How can messages be unified across markets?

How marketing departments are structured around this new set of challenges will change over the next few years as brands realise the old global ‘toolkit’ approach needs adjustment in the age of social media.

But overall, the notion of a ‘global’ conversation needs to be treated carefully. For any brand, there might be people talking all over the world, but they are not having the same conversation. The local is important.

So for wherever you are looking at communities, a regionalised strategy might work best, as it also allows you to test and learn. The downside is that your competitors may make a move in another region whilst you’re still learning in the first. In such a fast-moving space, that’s an ever-present risk.

This strategy relies on the involvement of local brand owners, who should be consulted and regularly involved alongside those helping with your global social media strategy. Doing so will make sure the brand personality and tone of voice is presented according to local tastes. It’s also important to remember that there may already be fan groups for your product in one or more markets. Your brand new ‘official’ community might get snubbed by the influencers if they already have a thriving community of their own.

Wherever you’re looking to engage, it’s essential to understand the local landscape when developing your community strategy. Then behave sensitively, credibly and most of all, relevantly. No matter the similarities or differences in each market, these three tenets will apply everywhere.

http://wearesocial.net
Communities never stop. They are – unless invitation only or restricted by language – global, meaning that comments can be added – and crises created – at all hours of the day or night. Among younger demographics, in particular, the expectation that brands will always be on is hardwired into their lifestyles.

‘Virtually no-one in his or her 20s in a developed country has known life without instant communication. Twenty-somethings connect with friends in real time – no waiting for snail mail or even email. They get instant news (whether world events or their friends’ status) as it happens, with a live feed of texts, tweets and Facebook updates from where it’s happening,’ noted Marian Salzman, president, North America Euro RSCG Worldwide PR, in the run up to the One Young World Forum in February this year.

According to Pew Internet & American Life Project statistics from September 2009, one in five Americans uses Twitter or another status update service. This includes 33% of 18 to 29-year-olds and 37% of 18 to 24s.

‘Social media is always on, and if you want to play in that space you need to match that. You need to think a lot quicker, be more reactive. If something happens, you don’t have the time to go around getting lots of sign-offs. You need to be on in an instant,’ says Graeme Boyd, consultant community manager at Xbox EMEA.

What do they think, right now?

Such real time reactivity can be a boon; a brand community becomes an always-on focus group that lets you see what consumers are thinking right now. You can get an instant – if sometimes unscientific – response to a business challenge.

‘The biggest benefit of having communities is having contact with it on a daily basis, not reading reports,’ says John Bell, global managing director, 360° Digital Influence at Ogilvy.

The most effective response comes not from simply listening but actively asking consumers what they think. US low-frills airline Southwest used its blog – Nuts about Southwest – to get feedback on its policy of assigning seating on a first come, first served basis. The response from fans helped the airline decide to keep the policy.

Crisis management

A positive and well-managed community can also act as a crisis hit squad, talking down the naysayers where other members believe the company has behaved well, or providing advice back to the company where needed.

And it’s also a lightning rod for complaints, allowing brands to take early action.

‘The customer who complains on a community becomes very important not just because they are unhappy but because they are showing to tens of thousands of people how unhappy they are,’ says Robin Grant, managing director of We Are Social. ‘Therefore he or she becomes more important than someone ringing on the phone.’

A key strategic benefit of airBaltic’s community is that it provides a forum where internal staff can discover complaints before they spread, letting those affected know that someone is looking into it as soon as the issue crops up. Such rapid response is crucial in the travel industry where mistakes are invariably a personal disaster for those involved.

Writing about crisis management in Contagious issue 15, Martin Lindstrom argued for the importance of careful planning and preparation so that brands can have an instant response ready in the case of disasters. He praised US airline JetBlue, who famously published an instant apology on YouTube after freak weather caused it to ground its planes on Valentine’s Day in 2007. ‘If the airline industry can act quickly in the face of catastrophe, why can’t brands from all sectors?’
More recently, Domino's Pizza followed a similar strategy to turn around a PR disaster by posting an apology from its president on YouTube, where a clip showing Domino’s employees doing unspeakable things to a customer's pizza had quickly racked up one million views. The company has been praised for its response to the crisis, setting up a Twitter presence to deal with customer queries and launching the ‘Pizza Turnaround’ campaign, through Crispin, Porter + Bogusky, to involve customers in an overhaul of the brand and its products. (See case study Contagious, issue 23.)

Search implications

Communities and their constant chatter about your brand can also bring benefits to natural search. With Google now including Twitter posts in its results, the real time chatter on your brand has an immediate impact on your page rank.

And because such conversations often seed through to other sites and platforms, inbound links increase Google PageRank and provide a notable source of traffic as well.

‘Community spaces are perfect for capturing “long tail” keywords. The natural flow of conversations in forums linked to a brand-relevant domain name can boost your natural search strategy. Users can be encouraged to discuss topics that include the search terms you wish to push, especially if those terms are topical or product specific,’ says Alex Sass, head of digital at UK-based Renegade Media.

Robin Grant cites the case of Skype, which was hit with widespread coverage of the allegation that the Chinese government was intercepting conversations via its joint venture with TOM Online in November 2008. Traditional media coverage included The New York Times.

While the company was working out what to say and do, Grant’s agency We Are Social listened to the conversation to see where the issue was being discussed. And once the company was ready to respond, We Are Social was then able to post a link on all these communities directing them to the official response, explaining how and why the breach had occurred and what it was doing about it.

‘Once we had an official response we went back out to these blogs and left a short comment linking back,’ says Grant. ‘Within 24 hours if you googled “skype in china” you got Skype’s blog post rather than the New York Times.’

Resource implications

Taking advantage also presents challenges. For brand managers there’s the requirement for additional or different resources. Reports indicate that Dell has 70 staff managing its communities, Starbucks a seven-strong team and US cable operator Comcast 15 dedicated staffers; clearly all three brands did not need this expertise even five years ago.

‘We have easily doubled our man power, we have had to bring partners over and above what we have historically done,’ says Lee Clow of the Pepsi Refresh Everything campaign. ‘[That includes] the online resources and the people on this project who can curate and supervise the voting and mechanics of the ongoing interaction. We have double the resources [of a traditional campaign] on our side and probably the same on the client side.’

It’s worth pointing out that in-house social media people are not just managing brand-owned communities but often are also charged with interacting with other social media channels as well, monitoring reputation and funneling issues to relevant departments across the company for response.
‘People come to communities because they want a more individual experience. With a brand that takes time and requires that the people who are involved can say: ‘I can spend two hours on the Facebook page’, says Amber Naslund, director of community at social media monitoring specialists Radian6.

The role of ‘community manager’ is a whole new one. It’s not something you can give to your intern because they happen to have 800 Facebook friends. The best people for the job are those who understand the vision behind the community and how it fits into the wider corporate strategy. When looking for a community manager, Radian6 advises: ‘seek out a professional that balances business skills with social media knowhow, strategy with execution, and can demonstrate interest and interpersonal skills with the people both inside and outside your company.’

What’s key is managing these extra resources and being clear about who is responsible for them. ‘For some of the best communities that have been set up the research and marketing departments have come together beforehand and said: “let’s agree who’s going to run it and let’s agree where the budget is coming from”,’ notes Verve’s Mike Hall.

Who does what?
Agency relationships will be far more akin to the relationship brands have with their search specialist than the traditional intensive three months of an advertising campaign after which everyone disappears on another job until the next campaign rolls around.

The bottom line is that agencies aren’t best placed to provide some elements of day-to-day management for a number of reasons: primarily they are unlikely to be as deeply engaged with the company as the in-house team.

‘There’s no one better to talk on behalf of the brand than the people you have chosen to work for the company. This is the opportunity for smaller organisations to be true to their brand and broadcast themselves really authentically,’ adds Tim Whirledge, digital communications expert at London-based social media agency Cake.

The second reason for managing in-house is the need for speed. A community needs an instant response: if the agency has to make a call, get approval for a response, produce some copy, get it signed off in triplicate and then post it, it’s not going to work.

It might be acceptable for VCCP in the UK to write the tweets for Aleksandr the Meerkat on behalf of Comparethemarket.com, given that he’s not real. But agencies should be wary about taking on brand community management roles where these relate to the core business of the brand. In many cases their function will be to produce content and strategy for communities once the initial launch phase is over.

Communities give brands an early warning system for crises as well as a way to respond and change the debate / They can be used as an ad hoc focus group – even if they are not primarily envisaged as a research resource / A lively conversation about the brand will also improve the brand’s overall natural search performance / Advertisers may not have the skills in place to manage their communities, but day to day management is most likely to be effective in-house where the community is related to the core function of the business. Agencies are best placed to develop content and strategy related to campaigns /
Brand communities don’t exist in isolation. They can act as the initiator of real world experiences, as part of a wider marketing message or simply as a vehicle to spread the message across other digital channels.

Integrating the community into the wider experiences of members can only provide a deeper engagement, it can be a means to recruit and identify your advocates as part of a wider campaign, a means to physically put brand fans in touch or spread the word through social network distribution tools.

A mix of on-and offline metrics can be seen in many of today’s successful brand communities.

Spaces to meet
Brand communities can act as both the initiator and follow-up message board for real world meetings.

The success of iconic brand communities such as Harley Owners Group and Camp Jeep lay as much in the fact that they provided the chance to meet in the real world as the online conversations that followed.

Today, members of the Harley Owners Club in the US get a magazine, a touring handbook and members guide, the chance to attend events, join their local chapter, as well as being part of the online community.

In Japan, adidas introduced a community element for runners who may feel lonely when pounding the pavements at night. Created by Tokyo-based 777 Interactive, the ‘HELLO! RUNNERS MAP’ features an online community using Google Maps, where runners can draw out a virtual path on the streets of Tokyo and then save this to their profile with information on their running style and habits.

This information enables them to buddy-up and meet new training partners – all courtesy of adidas. Furthermore, the site also lets participants translate their map into a fluid video of their running route using Google StreetView.
Bringing people physically together can also be a way of fuelling the online community. London-based social media specialists We Are Social’s Marmarati campaign for Marmite’s new ‘extra-strong’ variant took this to a new level. The campaign started with online calls to action via Facebook, blogs and Twitter, before a live event held in a smart London club. Here a lucky few helped taste test a new edition of the yeast-based brand, becoming exclusive members of a new club, the Marmarati. The most enthusiastic got a limited edition jar of the new spread.

This campaign illustrates the role of the community as part of the ‘mass and niche’ approach, which Contagious helped to identify (see Contagious issue 19). While traditional advertising reaches the mass audience, Facebook and the online community offer a more targeted message. Finally for those who were able to attend the tasting, the community delivered an exclusive experience that is likely to drive super-advocacy, stimulating word of mouth and fuelling the online community.

This split between mass and niche is found in many brand communities, echoing the drive towards transmedia storytelling, whereby campaigns flit between platforms, events and even more traditional ad formats. Contagious calls this ‘Prolific, not Precious’ – the need to create continuous content rather than concentrating on one heavy-hitting media campaign based around a single ‘big’ idea.

Kellogg’s Be Victorious campaign, for example, incorporated a community based on the stories of real women as well as both print and TV spots designed to drive consumers to the community.

The power of offline is also particularly powerful among B2B communities. Katy Howell, founder of London-based Immediate Future, says an early offline meeting can supercharge engagement for new communities given that networking and contacts are key reasons for participation among executives.

‘In order to gel people faster [you can] run round-tables, cheese and wine evenings. The advantage is they go back to the group and they are already connected to each other. The community will get an energy of its own,’ she says of a tactic that’s been used for brands such as recruitment company Totaljobs, anti-virus specialist AVG and Sony.

Real world effects

Brand communities can also be the drivers for change in the real world, encouraging action within existing physical communities.

The Eden Project, a biodome tourist attraction in the UK, has used community as a message in itself, encouraging digital community members to reach out to their physical community and get to know their neighbours.

The Big Lunch in 2009 pulled in ‘up to a million’ Brits, all rolling out the bunting and holding street parties across the UK. The aim was to contrast the fact that while we all have lots of digital friends, we often don’t know our nearest – physical – neighbours.

‘We are creating online calls to interaction that roll out into real world experiences,’ says Tim Whirledge, digital communications expert at London-based Cake, which works on the Eden Project account. ‘I think that’s where community gets really interesting; it’s not just talk but having an output as well.’

Doritos’ ‘Bring Back Slow-Dancing’ is a great example of a campaign leveraging the power of online networks to enable people to get up close and personal in the real world (see case studies, page 23).
Going mobile

The mobile phone, as the one device we never leave home without, can help carry communities out into the real world, particularly when location-based elements are incorporated.

Nike’s True City, for example (see interview, page 34), combines elements of Augmented Reality with an insider’s guide to London, Berlin, Paris, Milan, Amsterdam and Barcelona. The iPhone app allows consumers to reveal and share hidden locations, adding reviews to other locations mainly via mobile but also via Facebook or email. Nike’s agency AKQA says True City is designed not as a campaign but as ‘a constantly evolving, two-way channel of communication and brand expression’.

Foursquare offers another model for real world reward. The location-based mobile platform allows regular frequenters of eateries and cafés to become ‘mayor’ of each venue. Naturally this has attracted restaurant chains with deals signed by Tasti D-Lite in the US and Domino's Pizza in the UK, restaurant guides such as Zagat, UK retailer Debenhams, as well as the likes of Pepsi and Bravo in the US.

The reward for being mayor of a particular eatery could be a free drink or coupons and the value to the chain is that the lord mayor (or lady mayor) acts as a third party promoter for the venue telling their friends every time they dine there.

More recently, Starbucks has started using the location-based service to reward users with a ‘barista’ badge after checking in at one of their outlets five times. Refreshingly, they hope to go beyond the obvious discount coupon delivered to your mobile. Although no firm plans are in place, Starbucks also hopes to use Foursquare to provide meaningful prizes such as invitations to events, photo sharing or reputation scores.

Foursquare’s utility is set to increase further by a link up between the location service and Microsoft’s Bing search engine. The feature will sit on Bing Maps and tap into Foursquare data to post user-generated buzz around venues frequented by gamers. Bing will not display users’ locations but will overlay their comments and tips to visual map data to provide a real time tour and local business guide with peer reviews on top.

Microsoft / Bing /

Perhaps more traditionally, Kleenex has used its Twitter feed to drive conversations about hayfever in the UK. By getting consumers to create a Twitter pollen map by texting their postcode and the hashtag #atishoo, it has provided both a utility for hayfever sufferers and content for some successful and very traditional PR, generating coverage in London’s Evening Standard, for example.

The rise of location via Google Latitude and Facebook, which has now added location-based functionality to its profile pages, means that mobile/location initiatives for communities will only increase.
Mobile phones have always been a natural socialising tool and increasingly they are becoming a link for people to connect with online networks on the go. A recent study by PR agency Ruder Finn found that 91% of US mobile phone users go online to socialise, 62% use the mobile web for instant messaging, while 45% post comments on social networking sites.

Mobile is actually a better platform for social networking than the PC, and not just for the consumer. On mobile, brands can identify the users individually – one phone is one user while an IP location can be any number of consumers – payment can be handled natively, and we know exactly where they are.

Mobile not only allows brands to know who the influencers are but also captures the social context and location of their consumption.

With a plethora of mobile apps now incorporating GPS location combined with Augmented Reality, consumers have access to more information than ever before, and information that is contextualised. The new wave of location-based apps facilitated by the iPhone, BlackBerry and Android platforms such as Foursquare, Junaio and Layar allow users to play, connect and even leave digital public messages overlaid in AR. Increasingly civic authorities and brands can take advantage of AR to provide access to services or information at the point of need.

Now the mighty Facebook with its 400 million strong member base has integrated a similar functionality with users to see where their own contacts are at a given time and what their updates are – maybe a pizza recommendation at a nearby restaurant. McDonald’s was one of the first brands to take advantage.

We are only in the first iteration of mobile communities and great potential lies ahead.

Valérie Itey is an international social mobile expert, founder of Mobile MendIt Worldwide and a former mobile director at Universal McCann in Spain.

www.m-menditww.com
The network effect

Brand communities can be compared to our daily working routine. Every day you go out of the house and commute to work, taking your brand affiliations with you. When you walk to the office people might see the logo on your shirt and once you sit down you may chat about how your team scored the winning goal in extra time.

Affiliations and loyalties are passed on in every interaction. This also happens digitally; primary followers or advocates carry their affiliation on their social network page and every time they interact with their favourite brands, all their friends know as well.

This process drives reach of your message by harnessing the advocates as the distributor of brand messages. So even if the bulk of the community is harnessed around loyalty and building advocacy, the natural processes of the social web will send your message far and wide.

Facebook Connect – which allows brands to use the platform’s sign in tools, add share functionality and attract additional commentary – is a classic example of the tools that brands can use to spread their message.

So too are the numerous ‘retweet’ buttons appearing on blogs and other platforms, making it as easy as possible for consumers to spread the word. Facebook too has recently added the ability to share and credit the original poster.

This network effect was a key factor in the success of a grassroots Facebook campaign in the UK last December, which strove to precipitate rock band Rage Against the Machine’s 1992 song Killing in the Name to Christmas number one in the UK Singles Charts in place of X Factor winner Joe McElderry.

The campaign, which was started by rock fan and part time DJ Jon Morter, was helped along when comedian Peter Serafinowicz urged his 268,000-plus Twitter followers to join in, and the Facebook group achieved close to a million members in less than a month. Killing in the Name reached the number one spot, achieving 500,000 downloads in the week.

For critics of brand communities and social media in general, it’s the apparent failure to deliver reach that attracts criticism. Writing on the Millward Brown blog in January 2010, chief global analyst Nigel Hollis said: ‘The sad truth is that for most big brands, like the ones our clients tend to own, social media is simply another touchpoint – a great means to engage already loyal customers on an ongoing basis but not a means to build presence. To build presence a brand must resort to media with mass reach.’

Naturally such comments attracted a robust response. The most interesting argued that such a viewpoint didn’t take account of the impact of online friends. ‘If Coke’s 4m fans are just impressions then I agree it’s a small number. But if those people can be motivated, then the number is more like 4m by 126 – the average number of friends people have online. So the strategy is to amass then organise - it can actually turn into a profitable tactic,’ responded commentator Matt Hames.

BBH Labs managing partner Mel Exon similarly argues that such criticisms seem to forget that the average Facebook user has 130 friends: ‘It’s ignoring the network effect and the propagation effect.’
Every interview for this report has included one key question: how do you prove that what you do has made a difference to the brand’s bottom line?

While brands so far have been happy to experiment, now that serious investment is being targeted at this space, brand communities have to pay their way. And that’s the case whether the cash is coming from marketing and communications, the PR team, or the customer support budget.

‘It’s very difficult to get clear ROI figures on community activities and it’s very expensive for brands to put £100,000 a year just to participate in different groups,’ notes Asi Sharabi, head of London-based HyperSocial.

So it’s no surprise that the Nike+ site prominently tells you to ‘get the gear’ or that Dove’s US site has a reduced emphasis on ‘real beauty’ in favour of driving transactions.

‘Dove’s advertising was about real beauty but when you go and engage, it’s much more about the product; there are lots of offers and cross selling and up-selling,’ says Razorfish group vice-president, experience planning Garrick Schmitt. ‘Dove in the US is all about saving a dollar here [and there]. It gets transactional very quickly.’

Metric overload

The challenge of digital is that almost anything can be measured. There are seventy-plus KPIs for BMW’s China community, ranging from total numbers to number of visits per member, frequency of visits and number of comments on blog postings, all designed to measure the depth of engagement.

Radian6’s Building & Sustaining Brand Communities report lists a host of different metrics relating to a range of areas such as buzz and competition, content performance, sentiment trends, issue resolution and lead generation, but warns against trying to measure everything: ‘As you build your strategy, consider evaluating measurement tools and
platforms that can help you track the specific metrics and measurements that apply to your unique goals and objectives...Don’t get caught in the trap of trying to measure everything; rather, look carefully at the two or three indicators toward each of your goals that can help you understand whether you’re reaching them.

The extent and range of such measures indicate how far it’s possible to move from the topline. ‘It’s a bit superficial but our fan number is important to us,’ admits Melissa Loddo, digital marketing manager at New Look.

Now, one US social media agency has tried to put a value on that number. Atlanta-based Vitrue has calculated that a fan base of one million users on Facebook translates into at least $3.6 million in equivalent earned media over a year – meaning that Coke’s Facebook page with its 5m+ fans equates to a total annual value in earned media of over $18m. For the calculations and assumptions behind this figure, see Vitrue’s blog post at http://bit.ly/c2RtHH.

P&L vs brand metrics

Though there are a myriad of potential metrics for measuring the performance of brand communities, these can be broadly categorized into two primary models: one is based on bottom line profit and the other on brand values.

Social commerce experts such as Sam Decker, chief marketing officer of BazaarVoice, point firmly to the P&L as the only measure that counts. ‘When we started [BazaarVoice] we created it on the principle that if [our solutions] did not show the finance directors the results, the programme would end,’ says Decker. ‘Show results and the commercial impact and then you can add some bottom line expenses. That model will work all day long.’

Others such as Razorfish’s Schmitt argue that since communities are about building loyalty the most appropriate measures are the same branding metrics that apply to most ATL activities. ‘In the social media space you use the same metrics you use for brand value,’ counters Schmitt. ‘We tend in the digital space to say everything is quantified but you have to look at brand value and the metrics that are more conventionally used.’
Publicis Worldwide's planning director John Woodward advises using a combination: ‘There are several key measures of a conversation. The first is how broad it is: how many people are participating, how often etc. The second is how positive: we tend to use sentiment, and hence Net Promoter Score [a metric that measures loyalty by asking how likely a customer is to recommend the company to a friend]. Lastly, some conversations, though not all, lead directly to sales... There is a very clear link established by Friedrich Reichheld and Bain that underpins Net Promoter Score between recommendation and growth of both sales and especially profit.’

There is certainly evidence that successful social media strategies do drive better business performance even where they are not tied to the buy button.

The ENGAGEMENTdb 2009 report, The World's Most Valuable Brands. Who's Most Engaged, on the community economy showed a clear correlation between levels of social media activity within a company and its bottom line.

Prepared by Seattle-based social website producer Wetpaint and Californian strategy consulting firm Altimeter Group, the report looks at the world's top 100 brands and ranks levels of engagement, asking, for example, whether they communicate with customers through one social media channel or many and how involved different departments are within these channels.

Revenue growth for the companies most engaged in social media was 18% compared to -6% for the brand’s least engaged. Gross margin growth was 15% compared to -9% and net margin growth was 4% compared to -11%.

The winners included Starbucks, Dell and eBay as well as SAP and Accenture. McDonald’s, BP, Kellogg’s and Danone were labelled as ‘wallflowers’, testing a few channels and engaging only lightly in these.

‘While no one yet has the data to determine direct cause and effect, what we do find is a financial correlation between those who are deeply engaged and outperform their peers,’ says the report.

The poster child for successful branded community initiatives could turn out to be Burberry's Art of the Trench (see case study, page 29),

SOCIAL MEDIA MONITORING TOOLS /

There is a fast-growing number of paid for social media monitoring tools that brands can use to help track these measures. London-based social media agency FreshNetworks has conducted a review of seven (listed below in alphabetical order), which it termed ‘best in class’:

- Alterian / www.alterian.com
- Biz360 / www.biz360.com
- Brandwatch / www.brandwatch.net
- Nielsen BuzzMetrics / www.nielsenbuzzmetrics.com
- Radian6 / www.radian6.com
- Scoutlabs / www.scoutlabs.com
- Sysomos / www.sysomos.com

The review looked at factors such as ease of use, depth of analysis, sentiment accuracy, responsiveness and the ability to extract raw data. Radian6 and Nielsen BuzzMetrics scored highest when it came to depth of analysis, while Scoutlabs followed by Brandwatch offered greater ease of use. Sysomos was the most responsive and also the most accurate when it came to sentiment.


For more findings, see their blog at http://bit.ly/d85MdM
driving monthly sales of trenchcoats up 85% and overall sales up 12%. Burberry now sells two out of every five items online, a remarkable achievement for a luxury brand.

Jimmy Choo’s ‘You, Your Shoes and 72’ initiative is another example from the luxury clothing sector that demonstrates how communities can help drive sales as well as engagement. In 2009, Jimmy Choo launched a limited collection called ‘Project PEP’, sales of which would go to support the Elton John AIDS Foundation. To help raise awareness of the project, the brand, with the help of London-based social media agency FreshNetworks, set up a community website encouraging people to send in their own photos and talk to others about the Jimmy Choo brand. Results were impressive. Those who engaged with the Jimmy Choo 72 community stayed on the main Jimmy Choo website for almost twice the length of time as other visitors and purchased almost 3.5 times more goods than other visitors.

**Direct vs indirect**

It’s perhaps best to split the benefits of brand communities into two different areas: direct financial results and indirect factors that are trickier to measure.

Where communities link into an e-commerce site, such as Xbox’s ability to buy games or BA’s ticket engine off Metrotwin, there is a clear path to revenue generation.

Likewise, New Look’s Omniture tagging of items featured allows the brand to measure revenue attributable to traffic coming from Facebook on a weekly basis as well as numbers of visitors, providing positive evidence of cash generation.

Direct benefits also include the ability to cut costs across the rest of the organisation, especially in customer service areas.

‘If I had spent $500,000 on a community and I don’t get any value out of it, the odds of getting it renewed get lower and lower. Being able to reduce costs to my call centres by 10%, equating to $1m a year of bottom line profit to a brand, moves you from being a cost centre to being an asset,’ says Steve Hershberger, principal and co-founder at ComBlu, of a Microsoft Office community that saved $10m on support costs alone.

Even research communities can deliver direct P&L benefits – even if this was not the primary purpose of the endeavour. Communispace SVP of innovation and design Julie Wittes Schlack gives the hospitality sector as an example. ‘Number of stays for a given property increase, as do number of flights, but I don’t know if it’s enough to turn the [community] into a profit centre,’ she says.

Less direct benefits, such as increased brand loyalty or the ability to spot consumer blow ups before they hit the bottom line, are – of course – more challenging to measure.

Other indirect wins include the ability to identify new business leads. By comparing your fan base to the old-school prospects database brands can see if there are potential new avenues to explore. Radian6’s Amber Naslund describes a B2B healthcare business that found that 60% of online members were not in their sales leads pipeline.

Research community specialist Communispace cites access as a clear benefit of such endeavours. The fact that pharma research communities get serious attention from physician members – senior medics with whom brands would normally struggle to get five minutes – is immensely valuable. Being part of these communities also makes the target audience more favourable towards the brand.
There are other, more intangible benefits. As Publicis’s Woodward argues: ‘Few people would doubt that listening to your customers tends to make you a better company, and many companies would argue that their social networks have become a vital R&D resource, the source of some of their best (and most relevant) ideas and a key way to pre-test ideas.’

Costs of communities

If measuring the impact of brand communities can be tricky, then putting a generic cost on these initiatives is equally opaque. Certainly they can be cheaper than some of the prestige ATL buys that marketing directors happily sign off.

‘Let’s say you create a fully branded campaign site and a robust community, maintain it for a year, with people to interact and the creation of content. I would say that would still cost you less than running one spot in the Super Bowl,’ says Razorfish’s Schmitt.

Communispace prices research communities at $275,000-$300,000 a year, adding that the volume of research you can do in this way means it will typically pay for itself in the first three to four months.

The costs of setting up non-research branded communities can range from zero – just the time to set up a Facebook page or equivalent – to, well, the sky’s the limit.

Such costs could include spending on ATL to promote the community sites, building apps to help it go mobile or simply providing the staff to interact with consumers.

It’s important not to underestimate the human and time resources involved in listening and responding to customers on a daily basis – perhaps a dedicated full-time commitment – plus there’s the investment in measuring the activity. While there are some free tools to monitor buzz (Google always being a good place to start), more advanced paid for tools could present an additional cost (Radian6 starts at $600 per month).

For supporters of the value of brand communities the frustration is that sourcing the budgets for them remains tough, while other more predictable – but potentially less effective – initiatives continue to receive investment.

‘We sell a lot of solutions to clients that they are trying for the first time. Even though I think we are pretty good at articulating the impact, essentially at the end of the day it’s a trial or experiment,’ says John Bell, global managing director, 360˚ Digital Influence at Ogilvy.

Part of the challenge is carving out new budgets from silo-ed departments with vested interest and expertise. Says Bell: ‘The conversion rate for traditional online is 0.01% click-through rate [but] because that’s become predictable the opportunity to carve off $300,000, $400,000 or $500,000 to do something that’s less predictable is still tough.’

KEY TAKE OUTS /

Decide what metrics are important to you - direct ROI or brand benefits - as this could affect the approach you take /
Include ways and means to measure these impacts from your community, ideally demonstrating the bottom line effects /
Engagement across the social media space brings business results but direct cause and effect are hard to identify /
Cost of community initiatives will vary widely depending on what you want to do /

links /
Asi Sharabi blog / http://no-mans-blog.com
www.nikeplus.com
www.dove.com
http://vitruen.com
www.freshnetworks.com
www.netpromoter.com
www.engagementdb.com
www.wetpaint.com
www.altimetergroup.com
www.jimmychoo.com
www.omniture.com
Graeme Boyd is consultant community manager for Xbox EMEA, in charge of managing the Xbox Community Network as well as Xbox’s other social media platforms across Europe. Contagious spoke to him about how these communities benefit Xbox and the company’s plans for the future.

Contagious / Xbox has been running relationship programmes with independent communities for over five years. How different are these communities from Xbox’s 'owned' communities in terms of the way members react and respond to brand initiatives?

GB / The Xbox Community Network (XCN) was founded just before we launched the Xbox 360 and grew out of a desire for us to get closer to our key evangelists in the online space. They are our biggest fans and fiercest critics. We knew they were out there talking about our brand and products, and we understood the growing power of the community influencer - a regular person who probably has a day job or goes to school or university, and is therefore doing it for the love rather than remuneration. We also knew our PR teams weren’t picking them up at the time. So striking up a relationship with these influencers was the perfect way to generate even more grassroots buzz by giving them opportunities and information they could use.

Our community agency Digital Outlook started by scouring the web for a handful of the most influential European blogs and fansites, and their first outing was a trip to London to get a sneak peek at the new console. Since then we’ve grown the XCN to just under 100 members and reach over two million gamers in 16 European countries. We drop them games and hardware to review, get them exclusives and invite them to events. It’s not about bribery or telling people what to think – it’s about giving them stuff they wouldn’t normally get so they can offer value to their audiences.
Which leads us on to how the XCN community differs from our other ‘owned’ communities, for example our Xbox.com forums, our Facebook pages, Twitter feeds etc. Where we have a degree of editorial control (in that we can tailor the message to the platform) on those ‘owned’ communities, there is no such expectation from the XCN. This way we can get quick and dirty feedback about what the XCN community thinks and feels - good or bad - and that gives us credibility as well as some great market research.

Our ‘owned’ communities are very different. They are about building digital touchpoints where our fans and followers can connect directly with us. Our goal is to be everywhere that people are talking about Xbox. They don’t need to come to us to continue those discussions, but if they do, they should get value-add content and information they can distribute elsewhere. Ultimately, I want to build a network of interconnected social media destinations where fans can come together, talk with each other, get content they can share with their friends, tell us what they think and - crucially - get a response.

**What is the primary benefit for Xbox in engaging with communities both independent and ‘owned’: is it reputation management, PR or brand engagement?**

People are always talking about brands in the social media space. You can ignore those conversations - and thus get no real benefit from them unless you are a faultless, spotless brand with no problems and no cares in the world - or you can try to get involved to add value. But you have to be very careful. You can’t just pop up when someone is talking about you, say ‘HELLO!’ and manipulate the conversation to your own ends; but you can show that you want to listen and engage, either through reaching out to existing online communities in the style of the XCN, or creating relevant touchpoints where people can come to you.

So the answer to your question is all that and more. We use our communities to respond to technical issues, address problems, distribute news, tell our customers about marketing campaigns, and hopefully drive a greater connection with our brand by showing them that we're people who love Xbox too, and that we want to talk about it with them.

There’s a really crucial point here too: lots of brands (and we’re not immune to this) assume that if they start up a Twitter feed or a Facebook page then they’re suddenly active in the social media world and part of the conversation. The truth is that the majority of consumers don’t want to talk directly to brands unless they have something to complain about. So it’s very important to create content and engagement for your social media touchpoints, things for people to gather around, discuss, and believe in.

**What level of interaction is there between the different community types and do you encourage this?**

We should encourage this. A person’s interaction with social media is not monogamous - they will engage a number of channels every day, cherry-picking touchpoints they connect with the most. The thing we’re working on at the moment is connecting our touchpoints in an effective way so consumers can flow between them. To that end, we’ve been toying with aggregators that take feeds from video sites, our XCN sites, photo sharing sites, audio sites, our official news outlets and so on, bringing all that good stuff together in one place so people can engage with it easily. The goal is to create a hierarchy-based network of social media destinations, each one delivering what it does best (i.e. video should be on YouTube, photos on Flickr, etc).

**On Facebook you currently have one community page for the whole brand. How does a brand like Xbox, which has a plethora of sub-brands and games, decide what to base its community/communities around?**

This is something we’ve been debating internally for months. When we initially launched our Facebook presences, they were also planned to appeal to a ‘broader’ audience and focus on the games and product features we have that are aimed at that audience - music games, kids’ games, and so on. We did not put age restrictions on the pages. The upshot of that is that we can’t
legally communicate news or info about a large percentage of our games and products, including some of our biggest-selling titles like Halo and Gears of War. And as our product offering has broadened to film and music we’ve discovered there’s even more we can’t talk about - for instance, if we have a 15 or 18-rated blockbuster movie coming to our Xbox LIVE movie service we can’t promote it on the Facebook pages. The moral of the story is: think carefully about age-gating your pages!

On top of that, Xbox is a brand that sits above countless other brands, so it can be very difficult to reconcile that with a single Facebook page. We might post a FIFA Football update that appeals to, say, 50% of our audience but is completely irrelevant to the people who hate football and want to hear about the new Halo game. Multiply that problem by 100 and you can see the issue!

The great opportunity in social media is hyper-targeting and hyper-relevance - giving a smaller group of people something that’s of great interest to them. Ideally those hyper-targeted, hyper-relevant touchpoints will aggregate up into an umbrella brand, or a social media mothership.

How much resource is Xbox putting into its community initiatives at a local, regional and global level? Is the effort managed in-house or via third parties such as agencies?

We’re in a period of flux on this. Traditionally ‘Community’ at Xbox has been a discipline within the Global and EMEA Digital Marketing teams, supported by an external agency team. The challenge we have now is that the importance of community outreach and social media has exploded to such an extent that we need to scale up that resource quickly and in new ways. Social media is always on, and if you want to play in that space you need to match that. You need to think a lot quicker, be more reactive.

It’s difficult to out-source that. Does your agency always have all the info they need and the mandate to step in when something goes wrong? Do you trust them implicitly to maintain your brand’s tone of voice and come up with the correct messaging in an instant? And if it explodes who takes the responsibility?

In my opinion the best advice for brands is to get their own hands dirty with social media and not just rely on their agencies. Brands need to say: ‘this is something we want to get involved in, we are going to tell someone internally that it’s their baby, that they have to own it and love it and nurture it’. Brands can’t think it’s a part-time job, an add-on to someone’s current day job or stick it on the end of a brief because everyone else is doing it. It needs to be taken as seriously as your PR, your official website or your CRM.

How does Xbox leverage these communities for other marketing platforms such as new game launches and events?

This is where communities come into their own as marketing channels where we can send out the messaging - and get instant feedback!

A great example of this is the activity we did around E3 last year. E3 is like Christmas for the videogames industry. It’s a huge trade event that takes place in Los Angeles every June. All the big console manufacturers and games companies gather to show off their latest and greatest for the coming holiday season and beyond. Dedicated gamers love it and they eagerly consume every scrap of info they can before, during and after the event.

Last year, in combination with our EMEA PR team, we wanted to blow out our E3 coverage in a way we never had, and our communities needed to be a huge part of that. We set up a live, appointment-to-view Xbox.com video stream of the Xbox Press Conference (which kicked off with Paul McCartney and Ringo Starr introducing The Beatles: Rock Band and ended with Steven Spielberg revealing Project Natal, our controller-free gaming system) and drove traffic to it by pre-promoting through our communities as well as the usual PR channels. At the same time, we worked together with the PR team to select 10 key influencers from our XCN community and some broader social media influencers (like Charlie McDonnell, a YouTube sensation with 300,000 subscribers and over 30 million views of his videos: www.youtube.com/user/charlieissocoollike) and fly them out...
to LA to be on the scene. We collated everything they photographed, tweeted, filmed, podcasted and blogged over the course of the event and housed it on an E3 blog, also hosted on Xbox.com, as well as their own channels and websites.

The result was traffic far in excess of anything Xbox.com had ever experienced before at E3, and crucially 50% of that traffic was driven through social media or community channels.

How does Xbox measure the success or otherwise of these initiatives and is the effort being rewarded by a clear ROI?

That’s (perhaps literally) the million dollar question. We’ve got a few indicators. Because we ask our XCN member sites to tell us which updates (news, games for reviews, events) they tell their audiences about we can get a strong measure of reach through this channel. Since we allow customers to purchase digital content (game add-ons like new cars, tracks, weapons etc as well as full games, films and much more) for their Xbox through the web we can track clicks to purchase. And we can always fall back on the Fans/Followers/Friends model to measure the success of our social media touchpoints.

The problem with that particular fall back is that, again, there’s no definitive measure of success. How many Followers on Twitter do you need? How many Facebook fans, or video views? And is level of engagement or propensity for people to share content more important than those measures? We’re dealing with a new discipline with new measures of success, and I don’t think many of them lead neatly to the classic ‘path to purchase’ model.

Every brand engaged in social media has a responsibility to define their own measures of success and assign an ROI to that. Personally, I’m keen to draw up a scorecard which assigns an agreed value to each action a user can take on a specific social media platform, then totals them up to create that ROI. Multiple metrics aggregated into one overall measure of success.

It’s a challenge, but one we have to crack or social media will continue to be viewed as ‘fluffy’ marketing by some (often very important) people.

Gaming is by its nature very competitive; serious fans can be obsessive. How do you think these communities differ from those for brands from other sectors?

I like to keep an eye on what FMCG brands are doing in social media. They are often low-interest sectors without the level of consumer passion or evangelism that a brand like Xbox is lucky to enjoy, so they have to work harder to engage people. The trick is not to assume people want to talk with you as a brand, but to give them something to talk about and wrap your brand with that. I really like what Cobra Beer did on Facebook recently (www.facebook.com/welovecurry) - they found a way to make their brand relevant and interesting to people by getting them involved with fun apps and quizzes (note that they have another brand page on Facebook that only has 183 Fans compared to We Love Curry’s 63,000). P&G’s ‘Mother Nature’ Facebook campaign for Tampax (www.facebook.com/mothernature) is interesting too – I’m very impressed at the way they’ve made it fun and interesting for females to talk about feminine hygiene through their social networks.

It goes to show that with the right tone of voice and value-add you can create a conversation around anything.

www.xboxemea.com
10 ways in which brand managers can ensure they add something positive to the social web rather than create another neglected destination that no one ever visits.

**Listen**

There's already a conversation going on about your brand on the social web. UM’s *When Did We Start Trusting Strangers* report, investigating the rising influence of social media among active internet users in 29 countries, found that 44% of IM users had told someone about a product or service. Other channels being used included 42% by email, 30% had commented on a product on a blog or recommended a product on a blog, 28% had commented on their social network profile and 25% had posted a video clip featuring a product or service each month.

The first step is to hear what they are saying. This will help you find out whether people want to engage with your product or service and whether a brand community might be the right strategy at this stage. Free tools such as Google Alerts, Twitter search and Social Mention can provide some pointers, and more advanced paid tools such as Radian6, Visible Technologies’ truCAST and Trakur can go further to enable brands to get a good feel for their status.

Some brands including Radian6 itself have followed a ‘Listen, Participate, Launch’ strategy to brand communities: listening to the conversation, joining the discussion on third party sites and then, crucially, delivering what the wider community actually wants.

**Be relevant**

If you do decide to launch a brand community then it has to deliver some value and be relevant to your target audience. The best way to discover if your idea has legs might be to ask the communities that already exist.

Think about what you can add to the eco-system that already exists and don’t just assume that brand fans will automatically flock to the ‘official’ site.

Salutary lessons are provided by UK furniture retailer Habitat and
brand communities / dos & don'ts /

retail giant Wal-Mart. The former got its attempt to mine the Twitter trend completely wrong by using popular hashtags to ensure its messages received widespread distribution even if they were not relevant to the brand.

The activity coincided with unrest in Iran and the brand ended up sending tweets that read 'HabitatUK: #Mousavi join the database for free to win a £1,000 gift card'. The brand had to apologise publicly after users reacted angrily.

Wal-Mart’s online attempts to attract teens back in 2006 proved equally inept. The Hub promised to let teens ‘express their individuality’. Unfortunately this mission was compromised by the fact that it screened all content, told their parents and forbade users from contacting each other. It closed within three months.

Have a strategy

ComBlu’s December 2009 report, The State of Online Branded Communities, highlights a common mistake: ‘It seems that many brands create a community tab without first determining the real need for and mission of its community programme.’

The core message is that having a Facebook page is a tactic; whether it’s an appropriate tactic depends on what you want to achieve.

Think about your brief. If your goal is direct profit generation then social commerce tactics such as reviews and rankings may be the place to start. If you want to boost loyalty and empower advocates to spread your message then a brand community will provide you some of the answers.

Honestly appraise how much your brand appeals to its target audience. Experts dispute how many brands can sustain a brand community but the bottom line is that you don’t have to be cool to pull people together. Campbell’s Soup (which has a thriving community site Campbell’s Kitchen) and Dove show that even low interest FMCG brands can create a vibrant virtual meeting point by offering valuable content such as recipes, or beauty and personal esteem suggestions in the case of Dove.

Who’s responsible?

The rapid turnover of brand managers in big companies can be a killer for long-term projects like brand communities. The departure of the project champion can mean the whole effort slides downhill.

A key part of the planning process for brand communities must be clear guidelines for budgets, responsibilities for interaction with consumers and generation of content.

Because such initiatives cross department boundaries, they can slip down the gaps between marketing and customer service or product design and senior management.

Planning will ensure that departure of one individual will not mean the death of the project.

Power but don’t overpower / The one in 10 rule

Consumers will acknowledge the role of the brand in creating a space to meet and chat but if the brand takes over they’ll leave. A good rule of thumb is for only one in 10 messages to be commercial.

Give brand fans scope to influence the direction of the community and have a real say in it. Ambassador programmes and rewards – classic examples of microfame discussed earlier – for good members are two ways of encouraging participation.

The general trend towards ‘leaning out of the frame’, brands taking a lower profile in their communication and benefiting by association, applies doubly to brand communities (see ‘Leaning Out Of The Frame’, Contagious 22).

Set some rules and expectations

Brands can be humble but still set up a framework for interaction. This can include moderation, house rules and language filters.

The shared rules of interaction will be established during the first six months of the community, after this time new members will behave according to what they discover on the site.
Where brands are running short-term communities they also need to set expectations correctly. Be open and honest about what will happen when the campaign ends.

**Don't be stiff**

Brands can set the rules but they also need to relax a little. Common criticisms of brand owned communities is that they are too focused on the brand and ignore the randomness of human interaction and the joy of conflict. By their very nature, conversations are unpredictable and spontaneous.

An August 2009 article in the *Wall St Journal* entitled ‘The Fans Know Best’ cited a *Ford* community syncmyride.com for its voice activated entertainment and communication system which actively restricts conversation to the SYNC product: ‘Granma’s muffin recipe may win blue ribbons but because it’s not related to a SYNC topic, please don’t submit it,’ say the terms and conditions.

Brands also need to embrace conflict a little more. The success of *IKEA*’s ‘Don’t be Snobbish’ campaign in Finland was partly delivered by supporters responding to provocative statements by detractors. Such discussions made the campaign far more vibrant than it might have been otherwise. And for its part, *Marmite* has built a highly successful strategy leveraging the dichotomy between its lovers and its haters, including embracing the groups of haters on Facebook. ‘We talk to people there as well because hatred versus love always pushes the lovers to love it even more,’ said Niki Hunter, associate director at Marmite’s PR agency Splendid Communications, in an interview with Contagious (see Marmite case study in Contagious issue 22).

**Train your staff**

Interacting on brand communities is not difficult, but it is a big change from other forms of corporate communications. Train your staff to deal with these environments.

The Coca-Cola Company has produced a three-page set of guidelines to ensure that employees and suppliers declare their allegiance to the company when they interact and refer comments upwards where they feel they need a professional response.
The soft drinks giant identifies five core values in online social media. These are transparency; protection of consumers’ privacy; respect of copyrights and trademarks; responsible use of technology; and utilization of best practice. The guidelines are worth a read even if most brands will ultimately develop something much simpler.

Guidelines and training should help to avoid the recent debacle of Nestlé, which was heavily criticized when it responded to a campaign against its use of palm oil by taking a sarcastic tone on its Facebook page to protesters who used an altered image of the KitKat logo.

**Make it easy / ‘simple social’**

Everyone has too many passwords and user names. Forcing potential users to go through a long sign up process and remember yet another one is a turn off.

Take advantage of tools like Facebook Connect to make it a one step process. The watchwords of BBH Labs managing partner Mel Exon are ‘simple social’. Rapid gratification is key to a return visit for many brands.

It also makes it easier for consumers to participate if you respect their local customs and practices. Thus Asian communities will need more ways to engage than western markets.

‘It’s very Asian to ensure that there are not just one or two ways to interact. In an Asian community you can have five or six ways for the community to connect and it’s up to the community to decide which way. They will use two or three of these tools [such as IM or blogging],’ says John Kerr, regional digital director for Edelman Digital Asia Pacific.

Analysis conducted by ComBlu into the differences between US and Japanese brand communities identified key behavioural differences. It noted a preference for private, invite-only spaces over public communities in Japan, for example. In the latter, participants might only discuss consumption habits rather than personal interests.

**Anticipate problems**

Brand communities require companies to be more open to the world. They can also provide a lightning rod in the event that the brand has a crisis – as in the case of Nestlé. Management will be reassured if you create contingency plans for dealing with such events. As Martin Lindstrom intoned in Contagious issue 15, ‘the key to successful crisis management is thorough planning and preparation.’

Think about your plan carefully and imagine how social media junkies might corrupt the community.

Confectionery brand Skittles created a homepage that included a Twitter feed for any message including the word Skittles. Consumers put the Masterfoods brand to the test by including the word #Skittles in some inappropriate sentences to see if they would appear. Perhaps the politest one is ‘skittles are made of people’; others included scientologist propaganda, racist comments and swearwords.

The brand was forced to rethink its strategy after a flurry of inane and irrelevant posts and ended up pulling the campaign.
brand communities / next steps /

14 / pages 65 - 67

NEXT STEPS /
FIVE THINGS YOU SHOULD BE THINKING ABOUT NOW /

The trouble with digital is that just when you think you’ve cracked it, the whole landscape changes. Relax and you can plunge from prime case study to yesterday’s trendsetter very quickly. Brand community is no different in this respect from any other digital channel.

Here are five issues that we think brand managers should be thinking about.

1 / Mobile

If you work in Korea or Japan then mobile will already be an essential part of your brand community. Other markets, however, are still making the transition but it won’t be long before this is essential everywhere – statistics from the UK, for example, already indicate that Facebook is the most accessed site via the phone.

Morgan Stanley internet analyst Mary Meeker stated in her ‘Internet Trends’ report in April 2010 that the mobile internet was ramping faster than the desktop internet did, predicting that it would overtake desktop within five years. Meeker cited Japan’s leading social networking site Mixi, whose mobile page views increased from 17% of total views at the end of 2006 to 72% at the end of 2009.

For owned brand communities there are more challenges, depending on the technology platform. Moving to mobile is particularly tough for message-boards since their list functionality doesn’t easily translate to a small screen. ‘In the US, automobile forums are still incredibly active and they are trying really hard to refine a mobile experience,’ notes Radian6’s Amber Naslund.

2 / Language

The web used to be English but it isn’t any more. Brands with communities that cross borders or operate in countries with more than one language need to absorb a simple truth: communities will attract more traction if they are written in the language of potential fans.

This could also be one way for a brand to offer added utility if the pre-eminent fan sites are all English language only.

Last autumn Facebook launched a new set of language tools that allows multi-market communities to appear as if they are single language. Thus a pan-European site might appear in the UK to be English only and in France to be French only.

Although not well publicized, they offer the prospect that international sites can be localised in a way that doesn’t increase costs too much.

3 / Community integration

If your brand community is to become a communication channel for the business then consumers need to know that their messages reach the right department.

For owned brand communities there are more challenges, depending on the technology platform. Moving to mobile is particularly tough for message-boards since their list functionality doesn’t easily translate to a small screen. ‘In the US, automobile forums are still incredibly active and they are trying really hard to refine a mobile experience,’ notes Radian6’s Amber Naslund.
Faris Yakob, chief innovation officer at MDC Partners, sums up rising consumer expectations when he says: ‘If I talk to Coke on Twitter, then I expect all of Coke to know about it.’

Integrating the more casual communication style of communities with tried and trusted CRM channels such as call centres, email and old-fashioned post will become increasingly important. It is something that Best Buy has pioneered, using Twitter as a customer service channel with its 2,000 strong Twelpforce, but there’s more to come in that area. In an interview with Contagious, Paula Rosenblum, managing partner at Retail Systems Research in Miami, predicted that other retailers will borrow – and improve on – Twelpforce: ‘We expect retailers to begin aggregating mountains of emails, reviews, Tweets and Facebook wall posts. Using natural language analysis processors, they’ll turn that seemingly unstructured data into a new demographic – sentiment – and will slice and dice that by geography and channel.’ (See Best Buy case study, Contagious issue 21.)

There is some debate as to the potential of Social CRM, however. One challenge is that consumers don’t provide account numbers or their proper names. Until the technology or data exists to deliver this, brands may opt to divert complaints and comments into traditional channels.

‘Social media makes [CRM] a bit harder. You’re not self-identifying as a customer, giving an ID that a company can recognise,’ says Robin Grant, managing director at London-based social media agency We Are Social. ‘Replying to someone on Twitter or Facebook, you say please can you email me at this address.’

4 / Big vs small

Successful brand communities are not simply about numbers. Being one of five million Coke Facebook fans doesn’t make me part of a community, it just means I wear a badge.

Brand managers need to understand that bigger is not always better; it may be more fruitful to operate a series of communities with discrete positioning.

Using the term ‘velvet rope communities’, Radian6’s Naslund argues that participants are far more likely to engage with a brand community where they feel they can make a difference.

‘To many companies, a successful community has to be a big community. I’d like more companies to look at it and say how can I carve up our audience,’ she says.

She points to the success of B2B brand communities where conversation is vibrant precisely because there are a limited number of participants. ‘Because it’s a small community people feel they can make better connections. It’s hard to stand out and hard to feel like a contributing member in a community of millions.’
5 / Subversion

Brand communities are no longer the new, new thing. That means brands and fans can play with the concept, challenge our thinking and come up with new models of interaction.

The success of Chatroulette, which randomly connects strangers for webcam conversations and has attracted commercial involvement from O2-run mobile network giffgaff, is a key example. The site now claims 1.5 million users and similar platforms include Omegle and 22Talk on Facebook.

Brands have also tried to subvert the idea of community. Coca-Cola’s Euro 2008 campaign, for example, used a ‘mismatch generator’ to connect German football fans who were completely different, bringing vegetarians together with meat eaters to support the national team.

Burger King’s 2009 Whopper Sacrifice Facebook Application in the US, through Crispin, Porter + Bogusky, also turned the concept upside down when it asked consumers to delete their friends in exchange for a free burger. Facebook disabled the app but only after 230,000 plus friendships had been terminated providing even more PR for Burger King.

In the New Year, Austrian-born programmer Gordon Sivicic’s ironic Web 2.0 Suicide Machine enabled people to ‘detox’ their online profiles and disconnect from their networks. The app worked by tapping into social networking APIs and systematically deleting every one of your friends from that particular platform.

Novelty or not, what the suicide machine demonstrated is that people have a limited tolerance for social media saturation. As networks/friends/followers proliferate, people are starting to cast off those lesser-frequented platforms and networks, deleting old profiles and streamlining their digital footprint. We’re witnessing a move away from a myriad of thin connections, to fewer, thicker connections.

It’s no coincidence that the average number of Facebook friends – 130 – is close to the famous Dunbar number – 150. This is a theoretical number at which a community stops being ‘stable’ – the number at which people in the group cease to know and understand every other member of the community. Even if marketers are judging the worth of Facebook on sheer weight of numbers (whether ‘Fans’ or ‘Likes’), it appears that we know how to limit our social circles to manageable, and more meaningful, levels.

And this is where the challenge, and benefits, for marketers lie. By providing a utility, a platform, a sensitive addition to these connections, they get thicker, and stronger, and so does their association with the brand. Rather than an irritant, the brand weaves itself into the DNA of a community and becomes as much part of the experience as the participants.

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http://mixi.jp
www.mdccorp.com
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‘Community engagement is a long-term strategy. You can’t just stop doing it and go away. The end users expect and demand more of those engaging with them. Social media strategy is not just for Christmas.’

Ema Linaker / Global Head of Online Engagement / AVG

‘When it comes to social media communities, size isn’t everything – I’d rather have 100 highly engaged fans on a Facebook page who actually share and discuss content than 1,000,000 fans who aren’t active at all.’

Graeme Boyd / Consultant Community Manager / Xbox EMEA

‘The important thing to remember is that your brand community isn’t the Facebook page or even the microsite you create, it’s the network of conversations going on between people who like your brand. What really matters is to participate in this ongoing conversation, adding stimulation and interest. It may not be necessary to own the location. The brand may feel empowered by bringing all its fans to one place, but what is in it for those fans?’

John Woodward / Planning Director / Publicis Worldwide

‘Marketing directors are afraid of letting loose, which means most of their branded communities are really dull.’

John Weich / Creative Director / Lemon Scented Tea

‘A lot of the brands that have moved most quickly into social media and community engagement are the ones that have suffered in some way: business has fallen off or a brand has been tarnished.’

Garrick Schmitt / Group Vice-President, Experience Planning / Razorfish

‘If for whatever reason your brand owner or your company are uncomfortable with the idea of communities, my strong advice is not to do it because it’ll just be untold grief for all involved.’

Mel Exon / Managing Partner / BBH Labs

‘It’s a bit like hosting a fantastic party; it’s not enough to book the venue.’

Helen Trim / COO / FreshNetworks

‘It may look like research but there may also be an inherent value in talking to your customers. By activating one million people to do research you’ve done quite a lot of promotion with that audience.’

Faris Yakob / Chief Innovation Officer / MDC Partners

‘People got really excited by user generated content because it was possible to upload anything, but 99% of YouTube is sludge. What people want is curated content. That control protects people from being overwhelmed by rubbish.’

Tim Malbon / Founder and Creative Director / Made by Many

‘Social media is all about creating relationships - community members will become aligned with a community for the long-term if it meets their needs in an environment they trust with content they value.’

Jeff Resnick / Global Managing Director, Innovation and Partnerships / Opinion Research Corporation (commenting on the brandchannel debate ‘Entertain or Educate – which social media strategy is best?’, 2 April 2010)

‘Now when people begin a fan community – driven either by being supportive of a brand or negative – they want companies to come and participate but they want companies to participate on their terms. Now it’s less about having a secret place to talk about this company and more about putting up a public notice.’

Amber Naslund / Director of Community / Radian6

‘Letting visitors talk and interact makes them feel that they are part of a special group, which reinforces their support of the brand and fuels resistance to rival brands. Shared rituals and traditions also arise such as narratives of the brand’s origins and history, celebrations and unique jargon. These types of cultural underpinnings help tighten bonds between customers and company.’

Dr Dholakia / Rice University & Dr Vianello / SDA Bocconi School of Management, Italy (writing in Wall St Journal, August 2009)
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